# STRUCTURE IN THE COLLECTED POEMS OF W. B. YEATS

A Thesis

Presented to

the School of Graduate Studies

Drake University

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts in English

by

Barbara L. Croft

August 1970

# STRUCTURE IN THE COLLECTED POEMS OF W. B. YEATS

by

Barbara L. Creft

Approved by Committee:

E. L. Mayo
Chairman

Grace Eckley

T. Paul Blakely

Earle L. Canfield
Dean of the Graduate Division

TABLE OF CONTENTS


| Chapter | | Page |
|---|---|---|
| 1. | INTRODUCTION . . . . . | 1 |
| 2. | COMPLETE OBJECTIVITY . . . . . | 23 |
| 3. | THE DISCOVERY OF STRENGTH . . . . . | 41 |
| 4. | COMPLETE SUBJECTIVITY . . . . . | 55 |
| 5. | THE BREAKING OF STRENGTH . . . . . | 79 |
| BIBLIOGRAPHY . . . . . | | 90 |

# CHAPTER I

## INTRODUCTION

There is, needless to say, an abundance of criticism on W. B. Yeats. Obsessed with the poet's occultism, critics have pursued it to a depth which Yeats, a notedly poor scholar, could never have equalled; nor could he have matched their zeal for his politics. While it is not the purpose here to evaluate or even extensively to examine this criticism, two critics in particular, Richard Ellmann and John Unterecker, will prove especially valuable in this discussion. Ellmann's Yeats: The Man and The Masks is essentially a critical biography, Unterecker's A Reader's Guide to William Butler Yeats, while it uses biographical material, attempts to focus upon critical interpretations of particular poems and groups of poems from the Collected Poems. In combination, the work of Ellmann and Unterecker synthesize the poet and his poetry and support the thesis here that the pattern which Yeats saw emerging in his life and which he incorporated in his work is, structurally, the same pattern of a death and rebirth cycle which he explicated in his philosophical book, A Vision. The observations of both critics, as will be shown, strongly indicate that Yeats' life, work and philosophical book may be more easily understood in terms of a cyclical structure, yet neither seems

prepared to argue that this pattern definitely was in Yeats' mind as he prepared the final edition of his work. This hesitancy is particularly disturbing in Unterecker's work which insists that the Collected Poems be read as a total entity, the result of a conscious design. As to precisely what that design might be, Unterecker writes:

> The Collected Works were, I believe, to be what T. S. Eliot would call an objective correlative for the entirety of Yeats's life and thought, a kind of literary equivalent for the total experience of a man, a total experience shaped, through art, into a form less perishable than flesh, a form freed from accident.[1]

This is to say little more than that the poet writes from his own experience; of course Yeats did shape his experience into an art form, but the evaded question of the precise structure of that form invites further exploration.

When Yeats first began working on A Vision, he was overwhelmed by the abundance and complexity of his material and sought, in the romantic tale of the desert dancers which he later abandoned, a means of simplification:

> Even when I wrote the first edition of this book I thought the geometrical symbolism so difficult, I understood it so little, that I put it off to a later section; and as I had at that time, for a reason I have explained, to use a romantic setting, I described the Great Wheel as danced on the desert sands by mysterious dancers who

---

[1]John Unterecker, A Reader's Guide To William Butler Yeats, (New York: The Noonday Press, 1959), p. 5.

> left the traces of their feet to puzzle the Caliph of Bagdad and his learned men. I tried to interest my readers in an unexplained rule of thumb that somehow explained the world.[2]

In this connection, the problem of the Yeats critic is similar to the poet's: it is a search for order, for a scheme in which to encompass the details of piecemeal pursuits, a vantage point from which to survey the whole. In other words, the critic is seeking, or should be seeking, not elaboration, but simplification just as Yeats did; and it seems only common sense, if he wishes to understand, that he follow the poet through the problem and accept his scheme as a guide to his work. Thus, the purpose here is to establish a similar "rule of thumb" by means of which the reader may better be able to encompass the vast scope of Yeats' life and thought. It is true that the Collected Poems does not fit the pattern of the Great Wheel precisely; but the comparison does have value as a tool for understanding both individual poems and the total collection as Yeats intended it to stand in final form, with the added advantage that the study may claim to be representative, not of the critic's, but of the poet's own thinking.

The description of A Vision as "an unexplained rule of thumb" was, as Yeats recognized, an over-simplification; later, having gained greater perspective in regard to his

---

2W. B. Yeats, A Vision, (New York: Collier Books, 1937), pp. 80-1.

theories, he was able to formulate his famous response to the question of its reality:

> Some will ask whether I believe in the actual existence of my circuits of sun and moon. . . . To such a question I can but answer that if sometimes, overwhelmed by miracle as all men must be when in the midst of it, I have taken such periods literally, my reason has soon recovered; and now that the system stands out clearly in my imagination I regard them as stylistic arrangements of experience comparable to the cubes in the drawing of Wyndham Lewis and to the ovoids in the sculpture of Brancusi. They have helped me to hold in a single thought reality and justice.[3]

Perhaps no single passage from A Vision is more often quoted or more variously interpreted; Peter Ure in Towards A Mythology claims that the passage voices a "need for system."[4] Ellmann, by calling the system a myth, gives the work a bit more weight; in his estimation, it furnished Yeats with the necessary confidence to build a "Poetic Personality" which allowed him to live in a symbolic world of his own creation:

> . . . sometimes it seemed to him a new religion with which he could deny his father's scepticism; always it was a point of reference for all his thought and action. In a sense it was a huge projection of his life, filled with autobiography and rationalization of his personal crises and temperament, his own soul sitting for model for all the twenty-eight phases.[5]

---

[3]Ibid., pp. 24-5.

[4]Peter Ure, Towards A Mythology, (New York: Russell & Russell, 1946), p. 58.

[5]Richard Ellmann, Yeats: The Man and the Masks, (New York: E. P. Dutton & Co., Inc., 1948), pp. 235-6.

But, the poet Louis MacNeice, as will be shown, is nearest the truth when he remarks that "the diagram is merely ancillary to the poetry."[6]

Logically, Yeats' term, "stylistic arrangements," is a confusing one; it seems to be a definition, but it is crucial to note that it is a definition for "system." In other words, the famous remark is a characteristic Yeatsian tautology, and the tendency in all of the comments which seek to interpret it, MacNeice's excepted, is to see A Vision as a manifestation of Yeats' personal psychological problems, a phenomenon isolated from his poetry. Irving Howe, in his essay, "The Culture of Modernism," even goes so far as to judge Yeats' "attempt to place himself within a transcendental continuum" as "eccentric, willful and by no means organically related to his poetry."[7] Yeats himself, judging from his introduction to the work, seemed to consider A Vision as something apart from his poetry; but, when he offered to devote his life to its pursuit, his communicators sided with MacNeice:

> On the afternoon of October 24th 1917, four days after my marriage, my wife surprised me by attempting automatic writing. What came in disjointed sentences, in almost illegible

---

[6]Louis MacNeice, The Poetry of W. B. Yeats, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1941), p. 117.

[7]Irving Howe, "The Culture of Modernism," Decline of the New, (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, Inc., 1970), p. 12.

> writing, was so exciting, sometimes so profound, that I persuaded her to give an hour or two day after day to the unknown writer, and after some half-dozen such hours offered to spend what remained of life explaining and piecing together those scattered sentences. "No," was the answer, "we have come to give you metaphors for poetry."[8]

Yeats, of course, was required to systematize the disjointed text of his instructors, but the intent of their project was clear. The exact manner in which A Vision provides metaphors for poetry and, thus, the interdependence of that book and the collected poems is, of course, the central issue here. What must be established--and here Yeats' analogy to other art forms is a directive--is not the psychological, but the artistic impulse behind A Vision, and in this connection, Northrop Frye's article, "The Rising of the Moon: A Study of 'A Vision'," is extremely helpful in grounding system-making solidly within the artistic process.

The process of culture or civilization, Frye explains, consists of the transformation of the non-human into human terms; and literature, poetry especially, symbolically associates the non-human and the human world according to the two great principles of association, analogy (which in grammatical terms is the simile) and identity (the grammatical metaphor). This principle of identity is central

---

[8]W. B. Yeats, A Vision, (New York: Collier Books, 1937), p. 8.

in mythology because mythology seeks to embody aspects of nature in the human forms of goods and, in order to do so or, at least, in order to verbally express the relationships between man and non-man, it is forced to use associative constructs, which are the same tools that poetry employs:

> These associative constructs, considered apart from whatever assertions they may make about the structure of the external world, become a framework of associations of imagery, in other words, "metaphors for poetry", which is what Yeats' instructors said they were bringing him. In this context we can understand Valery's remark that cosmology is one of the oldest of the literary arts.[9]

In other words, "poetic thought is inherently schematic,"[10] it must be so in order to systematize the symbols of non-human to human translation and, in this characteristic, it has a definite affinity to mythology. Thus, the systems of Dante, of Blake and of Yeats, which Frye discusses extensively, are poetic devices or tools which aid the poet in structuring concepts and images. More, these structures are, themselves, kinds of total metaphors for the entire cosmos and, as such, control less encompassing metaphors

---

[9]Northrop Frye, "The Rising of the Moon: A Study of 'A Vision'," An Honoured Guest, (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1966), p. 9.

[10]Ibid.

contained within them. Yeats began receiving A Vision in 1917,[11] by 1925, he had sufficient grasp of the system or metaphor to publish the first edition, whereupon he wrote many of his finest poems,[12] notably those from The Tower and The Winding Stair whose "self-possession and power"[13] Yeats credited to his experience of A Vision. He had thought it necessary to clothe this first edition in a romantic tale and so made his fictional Michael Robartes responsible for the discovery of the Speculum Angelorum et Hominum, a sixteenth century work by a writer named Giraldus. The Speculum is, of course, the system and Yeats bears a striking resemblence to an ancient woodcut portrait of Giraldus.[14]

In the 1937 edition, this fictional mask, although still included, is neutralized by the inclusion of the true account of the writing of A Vision; apparently, by this time, Yeats had acquired sufficient faith in the system's validity to allow it to stand on its own merits.[15] It is important to note that the final versions of A Vision

---

[11]W. B. Yeats, A Vision, (New York: Collier Books, 1937), p. 8.

[12]Ellmann, op. cit., pp. 249-50.

[13]Ibid., p. 262.

[14]W. B. Yeats, A Vision, (New York: Collier Books, 1937), pp. 33-55.

[15]Ellmann, loc. cit.

and the Collected Poems were in process simultaneously; this fact suggests what this examination of the poems, both individually and in collection, intends to illustrate: that A Vision or, more particularly, the Great Wheel was a metaphor for the poetry.

In this light, A Vision, far from being eccentric, seems so natural a development in the maturing poet that even the miraculous circumstances surrounding its conception strike the reader as scarcely more mysterious than any poet's ability to seize and structure images. Frye writes,

> The well-known introduction to A Vision explains how it was dictated to Yeats by invisible spiritual instructors who worked through his wife's gift for automatic writing. Not having any explanation of my own to offer of this account, I propose to accept his at its face value. But it seems obvious that A Vision should be approached as a key to the structure of symbolism and imagery in Yeats's own poetry, as what Yeats calls in another connection "the emergence of the philosophy of my own poetry, the unconscious becoming conscious". If we did not have A Vision, a critic could still do with Yeats what Yeats did with Shelley: extract a poetic cosmology or created world of images from his work. Such a cosmology would have, or at least begin with, the same general outline as A Vision.[16]

Once the legitimacy of A Vision as a conceptual framework has been established, it seems unnecessary to examine the pattern found there extensively; its basic aspects are well-known and Frye and others have explicated it in

---

[16]Frye, op. cit., p. 13.

detail.[17] As Frye suggests, what is called here the pattern is, properly, two patterns based upon the two principles of association: the cyclical pattern based upon identity or metaphor (A is B), and the "dialectical rhythm" based upon analogy (A is like B, but they are, in fact, separate).[18] In Yeats' total vision the two patterns, while retaining their particular characteristics, are united in a recurrent process; but the fact that there are two patterns, rather than just one, accounts for the sense of a progressive structure in the Collected Poems and provides the dramatic tension of that work and of individual poems. Perhaps an examination of "The Phases of the Moon," a didactic poem which Yeats wrote in 1918 to expound the Great Wheel,[19] will prove helpful both in explaining the Wheel, itself, and in illustrating the manner in which these two patterns interact.

The poem is near drama: Michael Robartes and Owen Aherne, who bear the atemporal status of spirits or fictional characters, are crossing a bridge below Yeats' tower, the shadow of which falls across their path. A light in the

---

[17]Frye, op. cit., pp. 15-26.

[18]Frye, op. cit., p. 10.

[19]Ellmann, op. cit., p. 224.

tower window tells them that Yeats, a limited human, is still in search of the knowledge which they possess naturally; but when Aherne suggests that Robartes knock at the tower and help the poet, Robartes refuses, demonstrating, like Pirandello's "Six Characters in Search of an Author," that fictional characters have an existence and a will beyond that of those who created or detected them:

> He wrote of me in that extravagant style
> He had learned from Pater, and to round his tale
> Said I was dead; and dead I choose to be.[20]

Apparently, Yeats had considered Robartes' usefulness exhausted and had, fictionally, killed him off; characteristically, Robartes reacts, not to the threat to his immortality, but the threat to his dignity. Thus, John Aherne, Owen's brother, writes to Yeats in a letter from A Vision:

> Robartes makes no complaint about your description of his death. . . He is, however (and this I confirm from my own knowledge), bitter about your style in those stories and says that you substituted sound for sense and ornament for thought.[21]

At any rate, Aherne implores Robartes to "sing me the changes of the moon," and Robartes obliges as follows:

> Twenty-and-eight the phases of the moon,
> The full and the moon's dark and all the crescents,
> Twenty-and-eight, and yet but six-and-twenty

---

[20]W. B. Yeats, A Vision, (New York: Collier Books, 1937), p. 60.

[21]Ibid., p. 55.

The cradles that a man must needs be rocked in;
For there's no human life at the full or the dark.
From the first crescent to the half, the dream
But summons to adventure, and the man
Is always happy like a bird or a beast;
But while the moon is rounding towards the full
He follows whatever whim's most difficult
Among whims not impossible, and though scarred,
As with the cat-o-nine-tails of the mind,
His body moulded from within his body
Grows comelier. . . .
. . . . . .
And yet, twice born, twice buried, grow he must,
Before the full moon, helpless as a worm.
The thirteenth moon but sets the soul at war
In its own being, and when that war's begun
There is no muscle in the arm; and after,
Under the frenzy of the fourteenth moon,
The soul begins to tremble into stillness,
To die into the labyrinth of itself!
. . . . . .
All thought becomes an image and the soul
Becomes a body: that body and that soul
Too perfect at the full to lie in a cradle,
Too lonely for the traffic of the world:
Body and soul cast out and cast away
Beyond the visible world.
. . . . . .
And after that the crumbling of the moon:
The soul remembering its loneliness
Shudders in many cradles; all is changed.
It would be the world's servant, and as it serves,
Choosing whatever task's most difficult
Among tasks not impossible, it takes
Upon the body and upon the soul
The coarseness of the drudge.[22]

Robartes is here reciting the doctrine of A Vision: each human soul progresses through twenty-six successive stages, not only because this is the cosmic process and, hence, the soul's destiny, but also by "constantly renewed

---

[22]Ibid., pp. 59-64.

choice."[23] Life, itself, is a consciously created object. It is in this connection, incidentally, that Yeats' seemingly contrasting tendencies toward both abstract systematizing and lyric expression become reconciled. His search for order and his love of magic might have produced poetry of the type of T. S. Eliot's but, whereas Eliot sought escape from personality, Yeats pursued it to the point of mergence which resulted in a kind of negative capability. From a person analyzing his personality, he became a universal impersonality through which poetry would naturally flow:

> We should write out our own thoughts in as nearly as possible the language we thought them in, as though in a letter to an intimate friend. We should not disguise them in any way; for our lives give them force as the lives of people in plays give force to their words. . . . "If I can be sincere and make my language natural, and without becoming discursive, like a novelist, and so indiscreet and prosaic," I said to myself, "I shall, if good luck or bad luck make my life interesting, be a great poet; for it will be no longer a matter of literature at all."[24]

Thus, because the life of the personality and the work it creates are alike in their source, the Great Wheel serves as a metaphor or pattern for both:

> This wheel is every completed movement of thought or life, twenty-eight incarnations,

---

[23]Ibid., p. 84.

[24]W. B. Yeats, The Autobiography of William Butler Yeats, (New York: Collier Books, 1965), pp. 68-9.

> a single incarnation, a single judgment or act of thought. Man seeks his opposite or the opposite of his condition, attains his object so far as it is attainable, at Phase 15 and returns to Phase 1 again.[25]

As is well known, Yeats' total vision is based upon the interaction of two whirling cones, one called primary and one antithetical, which move toward one another, merge, separate, and move toward mergence again in an endless process. The antithetical cone is opposed to the primary in its qualities and aspects as individuality is opposed to unity, discord to concord, tragedy to comedy, aristocracy to democracy, evil to good, art to science, war to peace, freedom to necessity, Robartes to Aherne, subjective to objective, and the lunar to the solar.[26]

At first glance, the characteristics of the antithetical and primary gyres seem to be merely a collection of opposites but, as Frye points out, basically these gyres represent the "two great rhythmical movements in all living beings: a movement towards unity and a movement towards individuality."[27] In diagram, they form a figure something like Solomon's seal: two triangles intersect, apex to base, one is black, representing the primary gyre

---

[25]W. B. Yeats, A Vision, (New York: Collier Books, 1937), p. 81.

[26]Frye, op. cit., pp. 17-18.

[27]Frye, op. cit., p. 15.

and one white, signifying the antithetical gyre. The point at which either gyre's characteristics are at their fullest expansion is, of course, at that gyre's base. Thus, if the gyres are diagramed as triangles with the black, primary gyre's base line forming a perpendicular boundary at the extreme left of the diagram and the white, antithetical gyre's base line forming a similar boundary on the right and if the apex of each gyre is drawn so that it touches but does not intersect the base line of its opposing gyre, then the point where these lines meet on the left will represent phase 1 or total objectivity since that is the point at which the primary gyre has almost total dominance over the influence of the antithetical. The opposite point on the right of the diagram represents phase 15, where the antithetical has full dominance; the lower and upper intersections are phases 8 and 22 respectively and represent mixed states in a movement toward full antithetical subjectivity (phase 8) or full primary objectivity (phase 22.)[28]

Since Yeats was instructed to identify the different subjective-objective ratios of this diagram by numbers corresponding to the twenty-eight phases of the moon,[29] it

---

[28]W. B. Yeats, A Vision, (New York: Collier Books, 1937), p. 79.

[29]Ibid., p. 78.

is more convenient, for purposes of visualization, to round this angular pattern into a circle with one perpendicular and one horizontal line intersecting it. It is the same pattern, called the Great Wheel; the extreme left intersection which is totally dark is phase 1, its totally white opposite is phase 15 and the remaining twenty-six mixed states are evenly spaced, counter-clockwise, around the circle.

The historical implications of this pattern will be discussed in a later chapter; the interest in the pattern here lies in its implications for the individual personality. Each human soul, although he may be, by birth, of a particular phase, moves, during the course of his life through all of the phases of the wheel with the exception of phases 1 and 15 which are pure states of being and, thus, since life is a tension of opposites, inaccessible to the living man.[30] He passes first through the primary phases, sharing their characteristics, moves toward individualization and subjectivity in the antithetical phases and, finally, moves back toward objectivity and the primary characteristics in phases 22 to 28. In completing this movement, the soul employs the Four Faculties: Will and Mask or will and its object, "the Is and the Ought,"

---

[30]Unterecker, op. cit., p. 26.

which are antithetical, and Creative Mind and Body of Fate or thought and its object, "the Knower and the Known," which are primary.[31] Typically, Yeats explains the Great Wheel and the Four Faculties by means of an analogy to an art form:

> When I wish for some general idea which will describe the Great Wheel as an individual life I go to the Commedia dell' Arte or improvised drama of Italy. The stage-manager, or Daimon, offers his actor an inherited scenario, the Body of Fate, and a Mask or role as unlike as possible to his natural ego or Will, and leaves him to improvise through his Creative Mind the dialogue and details of the plot. He must discover or reveal a being which only exists with extreme effort, when his muscles are as it were all taut and all his energies active. But this is antithetical man. For primary man I go to the Commedia dell' Arte in its decline. The Will is weak and cannot create a role, and so, if it transform itself, does so after an accepted pattern, some traditional clown or pantaloon. . . . In the primary phases man must cease to desire Mask and Image by ceasing from self-expression, and substitute a motive of service for that of self-expression.[32]

The passage restates Aherne's remark from "The Phases of the Moon":

> Before the full
> It sought itself and afterwards the world.[33]

This cyclical pattern as a metaphor for poetry naturally

---

[31]W. B. Yeats, A Vision, (New York: Collier Books, 1937), p. 73.

[32]Ibid., pp. 83-4.

[33]Ibid., p. 62.

imposes unity and order upon a work or collection of works; its danger, artistically, is that it might, in its apparent determinism, produce a static, didactic art and, thus, miss the dynamic quality of life as experience. Yeats' poetry avoids this pitfall, however, as Frye suggests, by preserving the dialectical rhythm or the principle of analogy within the larger context of the cycle which is governed by the principle of identity. MacNeice, who insists that Yeats was first a poet and second a philosopher, might argue that the desire to preserve the emotional effect of these dialectical rhythms as against the rational appeal of the cyclical system is instinctual in the poet; and, in fact, as MacNeice points out, even the poems like "The Phases of the Moon" which Yeats intended to be didactic affect the reader emotionally.[34] At any rate, MacNeice would agree with Yeats' well-known remark that "man can embody truth, but he cannot know it:"

> A Vision with its seemingly arbitrary complexities is to be regarded as a diagram for something which Yeats knew to be unknowable; that he knew how any such diagram must be unjust to its concrete subject is proved by those poems which are professedly on the same theme; here what was static becomes dynamic, what was abstract concrete.[35]

Regardless of what may be argued of the poetic instinct,

---

[34]MacNeice, op. cit., p. 200.

[35]Ibid., p. 117.

A Vision itself provides two clear-cut loopholes through which this dynamic rhythm may enter the system: the doctrine of the mask and the Thirteenth Cycle.

The doctrine of the mask preceded A Vision in Yeats' thinking, originating, according to Unterecker, as a technique to objectify the personal expression of his early poems and, thus, avoid sentimentality.[36] The full theory as it appears later in A Vision is complex, but in outline it complements both the idea of a struggle of antinomies or the dialectical rhythm and the idea of the consciously created life. Unterecker writes:

> "Reality," for Yeats, is neither to be found in that buried self which directs and orders a man's life or in its Mask, the anti-self, but in the product born of their struggle. Extroverts, Yeats felt, must flee their Masks. Introverts--painters, writers, musicians; all creative men--must recognize their own proper Masks, ideal opposites, and in trying to become those nearly impossible other selves create the dramatic tensions from which art arises.[37]

In "The Phases of the Moon," Michael Robartes is obviously a mask, but not the complete opposite of his author as other masks are in other poems. He shares with Yeats a fascination with the occult and a dreamy nature, but he is more active and aggressive. He might be called Yeats' private nature as Aherne, the conventional and prudent man, is, more elsewhere than in this particular poem,

---

[36]Unterecker, op. cit., p. 16.

[37]Ibid.

Yeats' public image.[38] The important fact here, however, is not how well Robartes serves as a mask for Yeats but, as Richard Ellmann points out, the fact that a man may choose between true and false masks; it is this feature of the system that helps to break its determinism and provide the dialectical rhythm.[39] A man may act and be two different men; he is both and neither.

The second opening for freedom within the system is provided by the Thirteenth Cycle which, in the poem, may be what Aherne refers to as "the escape."[40] As Yeats describes it in the concluding two pages of A Vision, this cycle both defeats and extends the system and, in its lack of resolution, injects the tension of the poems into the philosophical work. The work completed, Yeats expects to draw himself into it and "find everything in the symbol;"[41] but bits of experience which seem to lie beyond the symbol torment him. He speaks of "that artificial unity. . . which is the decadence of every civilization" and says that "only dry or drying sticks can be tied into a bundle."[42] The lifetime of work seems to have failed in its reward; but,

---

[38]Ellmann, op. cit., pp. 82-3.

[39]Ibid., p. 227.

[40]W. B. Yeats, A Vision, (New York: Collier Books, 1937), p. 63.

[41]Ibid., p. 301.

[42]Ibid., p. 302.

suddenly, almost miraculously, the missing link is realized:

> The I understand. I have already said all that can be said. The particulars are the work of the thirteenth sphere or cycle which is in every man and called by every man his freedom. Doubtless, for it can do all things and knows all things, it knows what it will do with its own freedom but it has kept the secret.[43]

As Ellmann remarks, after building the system, Yeats builds the system's anti-self:

> All the determinism or quasi-determinism of A Vision is abruptly confronted with the Thirteenth Cycle which is able to alter everything, and suddenly free will, liberty, and deity pour back into the universe.[44]

The fact that the Thirteenth Cycle is philosophically untenable is beside the point; if A Vision is a metaphor for poetry, it is this cycle which provides the tension of change within order which the poetry demonstrates, it is a source or or, at least, a correlation to the vitality of the art. This animating principle is evident and self-contained in many of Yeats' finest poems, but the same principle is evident in the Collected Poems: the first quarter of the collection as it will be divided here (which includes "The Wanderings of Oisin," Crossways, The

---

[43]Ibid.

[44]Ellmann, op. cit., p. 282.

Rose, and The Wind Among The Reeds) illustrates, in accordance with the pattern of the Great Wheel, complete objectivity. The second quarter (In The Seven Woods, The Green Helmet and Other Poems, and Responsibilities) sets up the antithesis of this objectivity or a mask of subjective activity, thus establishing a dialectical rhythm between the two quarters. In the third quarter of the collection (The Wild Swans At Coole, Michael Robartes and The Dancer, The Tower, and The Winding Stair and Other Poems) the cycle is imposed upon this rhythm, producing by this tension some of Yeats' finest poems; and, in the final quarter (Words For Music Perhaps, A Full Moon in March, and Last Poems), objectivity returns, heightened to indifference. As in Yeats' own system, there are, of course, exceptions to this pattern but there is also ample evidence to conclude that, as Yeats revised and rearranged his poems in preparation for their final edition, he was guided by the structural pattern of the Great Wheel.

## CHAPTER II

## COMPLETE OBJECTIVITY

The fact that Yeats selected "The Wanderings of Oisin," a work which had previously been placed in the "Narrative and Dramatic" section of earlier editions, as the first poem in the definitive edition of his poetry[1] would seem, obviously, to indicate that he considered it the most appropriate introduction to the volume and suggests that it might profitably be read as a preface. First, it contains the idea of wandering, of a journey, an evolution, a going-through time and space or time and activity in an ordered sequence of events as opposed to a mere random sampling of the poet's work. Clearly, the idea of a single work of art was in Yeats' mind as he compiled the definitive edition of his poetry, revising and rearranging the sequence of the poems to form what Unterecker, whose A Reader's Guide to William Butler Yeats is based upon the premise that the collected poems are to be read as a single work, has called "a kind of vast Gestalt in which his experience, his prose statements, and

---

[1]John Unterecker, A Reader's Guide to William Butler Yeats, (New York: The Noonday Press, 1959), p. 47.

his art would unite in one complex but vivid thing."[2]

Second, it provides the motivation for the wandering. When Oisin awakes at last on the Island of Forgetfulness, the "strange horse," who might be Pegasus, understands the desire to return:

> He knew in his bosom deep
> That once more moved in my bosom the ancient
> sadness of man,
> And that I would leave the Immortals, their dimness,
> their dews dropping sleep.[3]

Niamh admits that she is powerless to detain him:

> 'O wandering Oisin, the strength of the
> bell-branch is naught,
> For there moves alive in your fingers the fluttering
> sadness of earth.[4]

There is motivation, the wandering is not random; and, despite the Romantic trappings, the motivation is not entirely toward escape, but toward mortality and its sadness. More specifically, given the fact that the bird elsewhere in Yeats' work is symbolic of the work of art or the artistic process, and that, as in "The Municipal Gallery Revisited," Yeats' test of his thought and song was contact with man and the soil, it seems probable that the "fluttering sadness of earth" which Oisin holds in his hand represents the impulse toward artistic creation.

---

[2]Ibid., p. 5.

[3]The Variorum Edition of the Poems of W. B. Yeats, ed. Peter Allt and Russell K. Alspach, (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1940), p. 54.--hereafter cited as Variorum.

[4]Ibid., p. 55.

The definitive edition, then, as the prefatory poem outlines it, represents a poet's conscious movement through time and activity in an ordered sequence of events toward a combined personal and artistic goal. The conception of the edition as a single entity, Unterecker's remarks and the poet's own, the weight, in fact, of nearly all Yeats criticism, force one further to conclude that that dual goal is unity.

If one accepts Unterecker's theory that Yeats' major theme is the horror of old age,[5] it is logical to equate the three islands of the poem with three aspects of life: youth, middle age and old age, or, in more psychological terms, with three types of men: the lover, the active man, and the contemplative man.[6] In much more psychological terms, Richard Ellmann, in Yeats: The Man and The Masks, assumes that the poem is autobiographical. Yeats is Oisin; the three islands represent his experiences as a young boy in Sligo, London and Howth.[7] If this is so, Ellmann then asks, why should the poem end with the hero as an old man? The most obvious answer in terms of the work is that the hero, having secluded himself in timelessness while the

---

[5]Unterecker, op. cit., p. 47.

[6]Ibid., p. 65.

[7]Richard Ellmann, Yeats: The Man and the Masks, (New York: E. P. Dutton & Co., Inc., 1948), p. 51.

world of mortal men continued on, is, in fact, old. Ellmann's biographical answer, supported by Yeats' letter to Katharine Tynan of September 6, 1888, is that Yeats, as a youth, thought of himself and presented himself as an old man as a defensive pose for his early dreaminess and lack of participation.[8]

The predominance of the theme of age and ancient speakers in Yeats' early poetry provides the first evidence for the theory of a cyclical structure in the Collected Poems based upon the pattern of the Great Wheel. Morton Irving Seiden's interpretation of the islands, taken from his William Butler Yeats: The Poet As A Mythmaker, 1865-1939, is important here:

> But, when studied against the background of his life and A Vision, the symbolism of Yeats' poem is not difficult to interpret. I take the four islands to be the cosmic quaternaries; the opposition of Tirnanog (sic.) and Ireland, the cosmic antinomies; and Oisin's journey into and out of Tirnanog, the cyclical movement of human life. "The Wanderings of Oisin" thus foreshadows, if implicitly, not only much of A Vision but also, though composed at the outset of his career, the mythological patterns of Yeats' later poetry.[9]

It should be noted first that Seiden finds four islands where the other critics count only three; the fourth, presumably, is Ireland, from which Oisin departs and to

---

[8]Ibid., pp. 52-3.

[9]Morton Irving Seiden, William Butler Yeats: The Poet As A Mythmaker, 1865-1939, (Michigan State University Press, 1962), p. 56.

which he later returns and Seiden, again presumably, would equate it with Yeats' phases 1 and 28, the dark of the moon or Complete Objectivity since it is, structurally, the beginning and ending place of the poem. It is the place of Oisin's youth and of his old age. In regard to this quarter of the wheel, some discussion is necessary concerning the alleged quality of escapism in Yeats' early poetry.

While escapism is a dominant, if sometimes superficial, impression of the poetry of Yeats' first three volumes, the origin of the critical cliche of Yeats' early escapism is probably due to a great extent to biographical factors. As Richard Ellmann documents in the first few chapters of his Yeats: The Man and The Masks, the poet as a young man was a dreamy escapist, a poor scholar, an ineffectual athlete and socialite, torn between the religiosity of his Pollexfen impulses and the scepticism of his strong-willed father. One would naturally expect escapism from an individual so tortured by psychological and environmental factors; but the point is that true escapism must manifest itself as a passion, an undeniable urge, not, as Yeats often treats it, as an option in intellectual debate. A case in point is an early poem from Crossways, "The Stolen Child."

First, there is again the geographical isolation or objectivity which the island setting, almost by definition,

implies, a technique which Yeats used in several of his early poems such as "To An Isle in the Water," "The Indian to His Love," and, of course, "The Lake Isle of Innisfree." On an island, as Huckleberry Finn and Robinson Crusoe testify, the situation, traditionally and intrinsically, is one in which the personality is removed from the environment which shaped it; it is thus, an objective personality in the sense that it is unshaped and void of duty or desire, it is raw vitality. This is especially true of this particular island, which Yeats identifies in his notes as "a very noted fairy locality"[10] near Sligo. The fairy element further reinforces the objectivity of the poem; the island is controlled by fairies and the speaker of the poem is not the poet, but a fairy chorus. Thus, the effect of the poem, while it seems to be a lyric longing to escape, is actually one of fatalism with the controlling forces of fairies claiming in the end the victim of their seduction, a conclusion which, given the poet's bias toward the human life in the fourth stanza, would not have been possible had the "human child" possessed a forceful subjectivity with which to combat his seducers:

> He'll hear no more the lowing
> Of the calves on the warm hillside
> Or the kettle on the hob
> Sing peace into his breast,

---

[10] Variorum, op. cit., p. 797.

> Or see the brown mice bob
> Round and round the oatmeal-chest.[11]

Ellmann might say that Yeats is anticipating in this poem the dangers of his early dreaminess and high Romanticism; Yeats, in his notes, explained the situation of the poem in this way:

> Further Rosses is a very noted fairy locality. There is here a little point of rocks where, if anyone falls asleep, there is danger of their waking silly, the fairies having carried off their souls.[12]

In light of this comment, one can now see the refrain of the poem, with its drowsy rhythms and alliteration, both as a seductive lullaby and as a capsule statement of the objective argument of the poem:

> Come away, O human child!
> To the waters and the wild
> With a faery, hand in hand,
> For the world's more full of weeping than you can understand.[13]

"Weeping," that is, the sorrow of man, which permeates Yeats' early poetry and stirs Oisin to action, is opposed to understanding, intellectual systematizing, just as the fairy world, the false solution to sorrow, is opposed to human life, the potential battleground for an attempt at understanding sorrow. The fairy world is irresponsible:

---

[11] Variorum, op. cit., p. 88.

[12] Ibid., p. 797.

[13] Ibid., p. 87.

To and fro we leap
And chase the frothy bubbles,
While the world is full of troubles
And is anxious in its sleep.[14]

The "frothy bubbles" and the "to and fro" movement suggest shallowness or non-productivity and the "faery vats," the "stolen cherries" and the "unquiet dreams" are a sinister licentiousness which Oisin has already rejected. The images of the fairy world are cold: rocks, water, the moon and the night; while, on the other hand, the human world is warm and full of homey images.

Further, the movement in the human world, in anticipation of A Vision, is "round and round" as opposed to "to and fro" and it is in this world, full of weeping as it may be, that the child has a chance, through understanding, for peace. Thus, in the child's capitulation he is lost, not saved; and part of the brilliance of the poem is that the reader, like the human child, is seduced by the fairy chorus and it is only when he reflects upon the difference between the statement and the deceptive impression of a beautiful transmigration which the poem contains that he realizes that, as the fairies have known all along, a human tragedy has occurred.

This contradiction between statement and impression balances the poem at a still point of objectivity;

---

[14]Ibid.

although the fairies have the victory, there is no lamentation on the part of the poet. Instead, the sense of tragedy is called forth from the reader's experience by means of images while the poet, as a speaker, remains aloof. The same technique is applied in "A Faery Song." Yeats' notes identify Grania as

> A beautiful woman, who fled with Dermot to escape from the love of aged Finn. She fled from place to place over Ireland, but at last Dermot was killed at Sligo upon the seaward point of Benbulben, and Finn won her love and brought her, leaning upon his neck, into the assembly of the Fenians, who burst into inextinguishable laughter.[15]

Again, the impression of joy in the poem is deceptive in terms of the true situation and there is here added a new dimension to the debate: escape is tragic, not only because it misses the peace of human life, but also because, like the bridal sleep of the two lovers, it cannot last. Thus, the fairy song is again mockingly ironic and, in the last line here quoted, issues the same challenge to understanding:

> Rest far from men.
> Is anything better, anything better?
> Tell us it then:[16]

Even apart from this technique of contradiction, Celtic mythology and legend allow great objectivity; it

---

[15]Ibid., p. 795.

[16]Ibid., p. 116.

is, in these Celtic poems, the situation, not the poet, which makes the statement. Likewise, in Yeats' early love songs, it is the impression or the style that makes the statement. "To An Isle in the Water" and "Down By The Salley Gardens" are good examples of conventional pure song; to the extent that they make statements at all, they are statements which are inoffensive and traditionally acceptable. These poems and others of the first three volumes represent, as has been stated, the quarter of complete objectivity; but the wheel represents a constant process and some poems of the first eight phases look forward to the second quarter. A good example of this movement toward the full personality is "The Lake Isle of Innisfree."

"Innisfree" is a true escapist poem. Unlike the poet of his earlier poems, Yeats here speaks consciously, almost defiantly, in the first person. No fairy woos him away, no fate takes hold of him. Instead, he reacts, with a clearer perception, against his environment, formulates a plan and truly decides to alter his situation on the basis of his new-found independent personality. It would be difficult, at this point, to ascertain precisely what this personality is beyond a definite determination and hardness which the technique of the poem illustrates. Perhaps a comment of Yeats' from A Vision would be helpful:

> The Phases 1 to 8 are associated with elemental earth, being phases of germination and sprouting; those between Phase 8 and Phase 15 with elemental water, because there the image-making power is at its height.[17]

The situation of the poem is, of course, that the poet stands on the roadway and hears the lapping water in "the deep heart's core."[18] At the risk of over-simplifying, one might say that the soul of the first quarter, having formed a heart or personality, now longs for progression into the second quarter. The "image-making power" is already beginning to manifest itself with a new precision; compare, for example, the "bee-loud glade" or "evening full of the linnet's wings"[19] with the trite "little snow-white feet" of "Down By The Salley Gardens"[20] or the unmanageable generality of the early rose symbolism. If, however, the poet here frees himself from some earlier difficulties, it is only to swing too far in the opposite direction; Yeats himself came to dislike the poem's sentimentality and its autobiographical stance, although it remained, much to his dismay, his most popular poem.[21]

The motif of the four elements, which became central to Yeats' thinking as he pursued occultism, appears in

---

[17]W. B. Yeats, A Vision, (New York: Collier Books, 1937), p. 93.

[18]Variorum, op. cit., p. 117.

[19]Ibid.

[20]Ibid., p. 90.

[21]Unterecker, op. cit., p. 80.

other poems of the same period such as "The Pity of Love," written for Maud Gonne, in which "the beloved is threatened not only by merchants but also by earth, air, and water,"[22] It is crucial to note that the missing element is fire, associated in A Vision with the last quarter or old age. In this connection, "When You Are Old," which pictures Maud Gonne as "full of sleep, and nodding by the fire,"[23] and "A Dream of Death," in which she dies and is left "to the indifferent stars,"[24] begin to anticipate the cycle which will resolve the unhappy relationship. Even if she fails to appreciate Yeats now, the cleansing fire and stars will make her simple in heart and his modest gifts can then claim her.

Almost too much has been said of Miss Gonne's influence upon Yeats and the topic need not be elaborated here except to mention that it was largely she who bullied out of Yeats his first purely nationalistic poem, "To Ireland in the Coming Times."[25] Whatever it may say about Irish politics, another topic well-documented elsewhere, its interest here lies in its value as an index to the emerging personality of the poet. First, it is a public statement:

---

[22] Ibid.

[23] Variorum, op. cit., p. 120

[24] Ibid., p. 123.

[25] Unterecker, op. cit., p. 77.

> Know, that I would accounted be
> True brother of a company
> That sang, to sweeten Ireland's wrong,
> Ballad and story, rann and song;[26]

At the time of this poem's composition, in the wake of the Parnell scandal, Yeats was deeply involved in Irish nationalism. He had formed the Irish Literary Society of London in December of 1891 and, later, with John O'Leary's help, the National Literary Society in Dublin. The object of both organizations was to publicize the literature and folklore of Ireland, not, like Thomas Davis's Young Ireland movement of forty years before, to participate politically. He hoped to encourage better literature than Davis's group, to foster true national feeling rather than to crank out propaganda for the mob.[27] Ellmann estimates Yeats' aims in the Irish literary renaissance as artistic rather than political:

> He was tormented by the fear that "delicate qualities of mind" might be destroyed in a mob movement. Fortunately he did not take up the alternative of art for art's sake, which would have excluded nationality from literature. If any generalized statement of his intentions during the early stages of the movement may be made, it is that he wanted art to be dedicated to the service of heroic dreams, and that in Ireland the dreams must be Irish ones. With this conviction in mind, he fought continually for a literary movement of the future rather than of the past.[28]

---

[26] Variorum, op. cit., p. 137.

[27] Ellmann, op. cit., pp. 99-104.

[28] Ibid., pp. 104-5.

Yeats' quarrels with powerful men such as J. F. Taylor, a Davis devotee, Sir Charles Gavan Duffy, a former leader of the Young Ireland Movement, and even Maud Gonne over quality in old and new Irish literature give evidence of the strength which his personality had, by this time, discovered. Thus, "To Ireland in the Coming Times" is a landmark, not only because it takes a definite personal stance, but because this stance, based largely on the poet's previously half-hidden occultism, is in opposition to the popular tradition. Ireland is "A Druid land" and its poetry should be "a Druid tune"; his occultism, Yeats argues, is nationalistic, even if not nationalistic in the traditional sense:

> Nor may I less be counted one
> With Davis, Mangan, Ferguson,
> Because, to him who ponders well,
> My rhymes more than their rhyming tell
> Of things discovered in the deep,
> Where only body's laid asleep.[29]

Yeats' rejection of the pre-Raphaelite "art for art's sake" theory, which Louis MacNeice discusses extensively in The Poetry of W. B. Yeats, is, again, significant evidence of the emerging strength of his personality. Yeats writes in "The Trembling of the Veil" that he was as a young man "in all things pre-Raphaelite,"[30] and that, being

---

[29] Variorum, op. cit., pp. 138-9.

[30] W. B. Yeats, The Autobiography of William Butler Yeats, (New York: Collier Books, 1965), p. 76.

deprived by Huxley and Tyndall of the religion he needed, he had "made a new religion, almost an infallible church of poetic tradition, of a fardel of stories, and of personages, and of emotions," complete with dogma:

> Because those imaginary people are created out of the deepest instinct of man, to be his measure and his norm, whatever I can imagine those mouths speaking may be the nearest I can go to truth.[31]

He was, as MacNeice describes him, of the Ivory Tower school, following Wilde and despising Ibsen:

> The Victorian worship of facts and belief in progress and democracy had brought about a hatred of facts, a belief that art stands aloof from life, is independent of history, and is caviare to the general.[32]

As Unterecker notes, Yeats peopled his Ivory Tower with experimental characters who emerged in the short stories of The Secret Rose; they served as personified options for his developing, if still somewhat contradictory personality.[33] But, by the time of the publication of The Wind Among the Reeds in 1899, he had abandoned the idea of specific dramatic speakers in the poems, "preferring to let them stand as aspects of his dramatized 'poet' or 'lover'."[34] MacNeice maintains that because of Yeats' new

---

[31]Ibid., p. 77.

[32]Louis MacNeice, The Poetry of W. B. Yeats, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1941), p. 43.

[33]Unterecker, op. cit., pp. 87-8.

[34]Ibid., p. 90.

orientation toward Ireland, he was moving away from the influence of Pater and the Aesthetes and from the Romantic model in general and toward an acceptance of life:

> The vision of Axel is fading. "We should ascend", he writes, "out of common interests, the thoughts of the newspapers, of the market-place, of men of science, but only so far (italics mine) as we can carry the normal, passionate, reasoning self, the personality as a whole." And about the same time he wrote: "Surely the ideal of culture expressed by Pater can only create feminine souls." In accordance with this change of heart his own writing became more masculine and athletic and the personality expressed in it fuller and less rarefied.[35]

The Wind Among the Reeds still largely represents the quarter of objectivity; the difference is that the objectivity is, in this volume, more obviously a pose. For example, compare the dramatic technique in "The Cap and Bells" to the subtle evasiveness of "The Stolen Child"; both are objective, but the former is consciously so, a staged allegory. The consciously objective pose looks forward, of course, to the doctrine of the mask in the second quarter as does the concern for methodology or the proper approach which "The Cap and Bells" and "The Song of Wandering Aengus" both display. In "The Song of Wandering Aengus," the fire in the poet's head, which Unterecker identifies with imagination,[36] drives the poet to perform

---

[35]MacNeice, op. cit., pp. 44-5.

[36]Unterecker, op. cit., p. 88.

certain occult rituals in order to call forth the miracle girl of stanza two. She fades away and he vows to spend his life searching for her:

> Though I am old with wandering
> Through hollow lands and hilly lands,
> I will find out where she has gone,
> And kiss her lips and take her hands;[37]

One might say that the girl is representative of the rewards of young Yeats' introspective and occult life style, and that she fades in the light of reality; Yeats was, by this time, being led into a very active and practical public life. But, if this is a true interpretation, the poem seems premature for it predicts, not only the coming public life which will overshadow his interest in magic, but the abandonment of this public life and the return to magic in the third quarter. This discussion over-reads the poem, of course, but such interpretations are possible and, kept in perspective, profitable; they function as guide-posts in a system for understanding Yeats' work. A similar guide-post, "The Circus Animals' Desertion," occurs in the final quarter. Again, that poem displays a concern for methodology, for the proper approach to life and art; but in the later poem, Yeats, living in dreams, wishes to return to reality, in "The Song of

---

[37] Variorum, op. cit., p. 150.

Wandering Aengus" he wishes to recapture the dream. In other words, as a further examination of the poems will show, the soul moves always toward its opposite in an endless dialectical rhythm.

## CHAPTER III

## THE DISCOVERY OF STRENGTH

In the case of Yeats' life, the Great Wheel was somewhat elliptical; the initial quarter of objectivity, during which he represented himself as the dreamy Romantic in Crossways (1889), The Rose (1893), and The Wind Among The Reeds (1899), lasted exactly half of his life, while the second quarter, that of the discovery of strength through the adoption of a mask of activity, and the third and fourth quarters lasted, at most, only about ten years each. Of course, the division of Yeats' life into quarters is not an exact science, but there is some justification for defining the years, 1903-1917, as a new period, one in which, as his friends said, he was "externalized" in opposition to his earlier introverted, even elusive personality. Ellmann writes,

> The years from Maud Gonne's marriage in 1903 to Yeats's own in 1917 provide a curious parallel to those from 1895 to 1903. The poet felt called upon to rebel against his own past. . .[1]

Since much of this initial quarter is childhood and adolescence, its disproportionate length does not necessarily imply that Yeats was slow to find his appropriate life style,

---

[1]Richard Ellmann, Yeats: The Man and the Masks, (New York: E. P. Dutton & Co., Inc., 1948), pp. 164-5.

but Yeats himself seemed to think so in a 1914 poem from Responsibilities, "Pardon Old Fathers":

> Pardon that for a barren passion's sake,
> Although I have come close on forty-nine,
> I have no child, I have nothing but a book,
> Nothing but that to prove your blood and mine.[2]

The "barren passion" is, of course, Yeats' love for Maud Gonne, who had, until her sudden marriage, been a strong influence upon both his life and his poetry. Her marriage was a shock to Yeats and, as Ellmann implies, urged him into a frantic catching-up process:

> He was broad-awake and thirty-seven years old, half of his life over. What would he do now that his most cherished dream was gone?[3]

According to Ellmann, Yeats' early poetry was "no more than minor;" like his life, it was "skillfully evasive," "self-indulgent," and based upon a kind of "see-saw" appreciation of opposites, it represented an "artificial simplicity" or what is being termed here objectivity.[4] Miss Gonne's marriage to the activist, MacBride, caused Yeats to re-examine his past and, in part, drove him toward the mask of activity:

---

[2]The Variorum Edition of the Poems of W. B. Yeats, ed. Peter Allt and Russell K. Alspach, (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1940), p. 270.--hereafter cited as Variorum.

[3]Ellmann, op. cit., p. 160.

[4]Ibid., pp. 161-3.

> Yeats blamed his own timid, critical intellect for restraining his impetuous nature so that when he should have embraced he had feared and qualified and idealized. He had lost the capacity for acting on instinct which men like MacBride, lacking the critical mind, possessed. Maud Gonne's marriage was therefore an indictment; instead of condemning her, he condemned himself, . . .[5]

Ellmann is writing biography and, of course, sees Yeats' work in psychological terms; Unterecker, on the other hand, is writing a guide to poetry and, as mentioned in the preceding chapter, sees the theory of the mask as a technique. Yeats, in A Vision, thought he was discovering the scheme of the universe and since this philosophy encompasses the other two considerations and is the focus here, it is worthwhile, at this point, to consider what Yeats believed he was and the mask which he saw as his proper role.

Most critics agree that, although he did not say so, Yeats thought of himself, along with Shelley and Dante, as a man of phase 17, that of the Daimonic Man.[6] In A Vision, he explains that,

> He is called the Daimonic man because Unity of Being, and consequent expression of Daimonic thought, is now more easy than at any other phase, . . .The Will is falling asunder, but

---

[5]Ibid., p. 166.

[6]John Unterecker, A Reader's Guide To William Butler Yeats, (New York: The Noonday Press, 1959), p. 26.

> without explosion and noise. . . .The being has for its supreme aim, as it has at Phase 16 (and as all subsequent antithetical phases shall have), to hide from itself and others this separation and disorder, . . . When true to phase the intellect must turn all its synthetic power to this task. It finds, not the impassioned myth that Phase 16 found, but a Mask of simplicity that is also intensity. . . .The Will, when true to phase, assumes, in assuming the Mask, an intensity which is never dramatic but always a deliberate assumption, is to others but the charm of the being; . . .If it be out of phase it will avoid the subjective conflict, acquiesce, hope that the Body of Fate may die away;[7]

Yeats, in his early poetry, avoided subjective conflict, as has been shown in Chapter II, through objectivity. His Body of Fate was "Loss,"[8] more specifically, loss of Maud Gonne and, thus, one can see in his early poems to her ("When You Are Old", "A Dream of Death", "He Wishes His Beloved Were Dead") the same sort of stylized death wish which A Vision attributes to the Will out of phase. "Dispersal," a term which might characterize Yeats' early verse and, perhaps, his natural disposition, is the False Mask of the Daimonic Man; his true mask is that one which is most difficult for him to attain, "Simplification through intensity."[9]

Yeats' true mask began to emerge in his poetry in

---

[7]W. B. Yeats, A Vision, (New York: Collier Books, 1937), pp. 141-2.

[8]Ibid., p. 141.

[9]Ibid., p. 140.

In the Seven Woods as a conversational tone, heightened by an occasional vivid image; as in drama, with which Yeats was much involved at this time, the poems were to give the sense of a specific situation and an active speaker who, although motivated by a strong passion, restrains himself almost to the point of indifference.[10] "Adam's Curse" is, perhaps, the best example of this new poetry; in a specific time and place setting, a cast of three characters discuss the three parallel labors: that of the poet, the beautiful woman and the lover. But, as Unterecker explains, the discussion serves to advance one of Yeats' major doctrines:

> Yeats's strategy in the poem is simple enough, though he moves so effortlessly from the direct statement of one of his basic aesthetic doctrines (poetry must seem casual and yet all parts must be articulated one with the other) into a general discussion of the function of technique in the production of all fine things of life, that we are hardly aware that a principle of art has been extended to a principle of behavior.[11]

Simplification through intensity is not evident in the dialogue itself, however, nor in the intellectual statement of theme but occurs, as Unterecker suggests, in the concluding silence of the poem and the vivid conception

---

[10]Unterecker, op. cit., p. 97.

[11]Ibid., p. 99.

of the moon as symbolic of time and as a parallel to time's effect on the labor of love:

> A moon, worn as if it had been a shell
> Washed by time's waters as they rose and fell
> About the stars and broke in days and years.
>
> I had a thought for no one's but your ears:
> That you were beautiful, and that I strove
> To love you in the old high way of love;
> That it had all seemed happy, and yet we'd grown
> As weary-hearted as that hollow moon.[12]

The understatement, of "it had all seemed happy" for example, supports T. R. Henn's observation of a new style in the poems between 1908 and 1914, a style characterized by deliberate self-criticism and intellectualism which intends to avoid sentimentality by "a progression from pre-Raphaelite colour and sensation."[13]

That this new intellectualism and self-criticism constitutes a deliberate change in style is evident in "The Mask," a 1910 poem from The Player Queen and one which Richard Ellmann puts in evidence of Yeats' "policy of concealment of his more intimate self" behind the "habiliments of arrogance and power."[14] The poem is, again, a conversation, but this time a highly affected one and, whereas "Adam's Curse" was concerned with the truth behind the appearance, the speaker in "The Mask" seems unconcerned

---

[12] Variorum, op. cit., p. 206.

[13] T. R. Henn, "The Green Helmet and Responsibilities," An Honoured Guest, (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1966), p. 34.

[14] Ellmann, op. cit., p. 171.

or, at least, secretive as to whether "love or deceit" lies behind his pose, preferring to live solely upon the effects of that pose:

> It was the mask engaged your mind,
> And after set your heart to beat,
> Not what's behind.[15]

Ellmann may be correct in his estimation that Yeats' cult of passion in the 'nineties persisted into the new century, not, as formerly, in the idea of perfect love, but as pure hatred.[16] There is, certainly, the new "tooth of satire" which Ezra Pound, a newly-found friend and critic of Yeats', applauded in his review of Responsibilities in poems like "To A Poet, Who Would Have Me Praise Certain Bad Poets, Imitators of His and Mine," "September 1913," "To A Shade," and "Paudeen." But if, as Ellmann also suggests, the mask was not only a defensive measure but a "weapon of attack," Yeats, who had by now become a public figure, active in both politics and in the Abbey Theatre, felt he had just cause for his anger, particularly his anger at the middle class. Ellmann writes,

> Now, in the time of the shattering of idols, he was angry with Ireland as with himself and with Maud. He searched for explanations of the stupidity and ill will of his enemies, and too easily believed he could find most of them in

---

[15] Variorum, op. cit., p. 263.

[16] Ellmann, op. cit., p. 179.

> class distinctions. Lady Gregory, his well born friend, helped to confirm his prejudice;[17]

In this revolutionary time, three controversies in particular stirred his imagination: the attacks upon Parnell, the riots over The Playboy of the Western World, and the Dublin public's failure to secure funds to house Hugh Lane's intended gift to Ireland of his collection of French paintings.[18]

Added to these there were other upsets: the deaths of Synge and O'Leary, the land agitation that threatened Coole Park, the illness of Lady Gregory, the exhausting and unappreciated drudgery at the Abbey, the fading hopes for the resurrection of Irish poetry and Yeats' personal conviction that his popularity and perhaps even his career as a poet was ended.[19] All of these considerations find their place in his poetry and references to them are either obvious or well documented elsewhere. The important thing to note is that all of the poems which are directed toward contemporary issues, however deeply they might have been felt, are, in terms of Yeats' poetic stance, representative of the mask, just as in personal terms his

---

[17]Ibid., pp. 173-77.

[18]Henn, op. cit., pp. 34-5.

[19]Ibid., pp. 35-6.

activism was enforced upon his essentially antithetical and introverted nature. A dialectical rhythm has, by this time, been established between the man and the mask and the resulting tension flashes out in individual poems despite the superficial evenness of the posture of scorn.

Such is the case, Unterecker suggests, in the beggar and hermit poems which appear in Responsibilities and set up the antithesis of that title, irresponsibility.[20] These poems, especially in comparison to others written to glorify the aristocracy ("Pardon Old Fathers," "To A Friend Whose Work Has Come To Nothing," "These Are the Clouds," "At the Abbey Theatre" and, of course, later poems) illustrate the social code which Yeats was beginning to form from his disappointments. The artists, he believed, are the one valuable class since it is they who can formulate experience into a permanent contribution to civilization; but they require the assistance of two other classes, the noble and the beggar, one to act as patron and consumer, and the other to provide a reservoir of energy and imagery which could be used as materials for art. Naturally, Yeats, as the poet of antinomies and the man who had been abused by the populace, found no

---

[20]Unterecker, op. cit., p. 121.

function for the middle class in his ideal society.[21]

This societal scheme serves as an archetype of Yeats' thinking for, characteristically, it is a vital unity composed of antinomies which the artist, standing aloof in the center, reconciles and to which he gives permanent form. The artist's detachment, his individuality in a class society constitutes his true nature; the activity, or the labor of reconciliation, is his mask and his adoption of it fullfills him so long as the man and the mask remain in balance. This is an ideal conception, however, just as "To A Friend Whose Work Has Come To Nothing" is the ideal response to the aristocrat's frustration with the middle class. But, to "be secret and exult" as Yeats says, is, of all things, "most difficult"[22] and individual poems of this period show him struggling with the mask he has adopted.

A good example of this struggle is "The Fascination of What's Difficult," a poem written in reaction to Yeats' experiences at the Abbey Theatre which, he seems to be saying, have destroyed his natural disposition, and perhaps even his poetic inspiration:

> The fascination of what's difficult
> Has dried the sap out of my veins, and rent

---

[21] Ibid., pp. 121-2.

[22] Variorum, op. cit., p. 291.

> Spontaneous joy and natural content
> Out of my heart.[23]

Writing the particular kind of play which the Abbey, as a public and nationalistic theatre, required constituted for Yeats an anti-self or mask that over-taxed and threatened to destroy the man beneath it just as, in comparison, Pegasus' anti-self, the draft horse, defiles the noble symbol of poetry. Words such as "curse," "war," "knave and dolt," the utter contempt implied in the term, "theatre business," and the intensely realized predicament of Pegasus, straining under his task, indicate an underlying but growing reactionary anger not, as in other poems of the same period, against the public, but against the role Yeats is playing. As the Great Wheel pattern predicts, the personality is gaining strength and if, as the first four lines here quoted indicate, Yeats cannot go back to his former natural style, he is determined not to live only as a mask but to synthesize the two and, thus, free his creativity for even greater poetry:

> I swear before the dawn comes round again
> I'll find the stable and pull out the bolt.[24]

"All Things Can Tempt Me" shows a similar frustration with the mask, again, because the duty it imposes keeps

---

[23]Ibid., p. 260.

[24]Ibid.

him from the fullest achievement of his art:

> All things can tempt me from this craft of verse:
> One time it was a woman's face, or worse--
> The seeming needs of my fool-driven land;[25]

The term, "craft of verse," is significant here of the new hardness and sense of labor in art which almost all of the poems from this section demonstrate; and, as in "The Fascination of What's Difficult," Yeats' former sentimentally heroic style, represented by the singing poet with the sword upstairs, is abandoned in his wish to be "colder and dumber and deafer than a fish."[26]

This concluding line might refer to Yeats' belief that his career was at an end but, with reference to the Great Wheel as set forth in "The Phases of the Moon," it also might predict the approaching period of total subjectivity at phase 15:

> Under the frenzy of the fourteenth moon,
> The soul begins to tremble into stillness,
> To die into the labyrinth of itself![27]

In other words, a kind of solipsism has set in which is evident in the concluding poem of Responsibilities, "A Coat," and in the epilogue of that volume, "While I, from that reed-throated whisperer." There is little disagreement

---

[25]Ibid., p. 267.

[26]Ibid.

[27]W. B. Yeats, A Vision, (New York: Collier Books, 1937), p. 60.

that "A Coat" is a deliberate and public announcement of a change in Yeats' poetic style; he will, henceforth, abandon the old mythologies and songs and "walk naked," not only because fools have belittled his coat of song, which in itself would constitute a defeat, but because there is more "enterprise" in the new style.[28] It is the word, enterprise, signifying the undertaking of a difficult venture, which proves that Yeats has learned the lesson of public defeat which he sought, in "To A Friend Whose Work Has Come to Nothing," to teach to Lady Gregory:

> Bred to a harder thing
> Than Triumph, turn away
> And like a laughing string
> Whereon mad fingers play
> Amid a place of stone,
> Be secret and exult,
> Because of all things known
> That is most difficult.[29]

Placed strategically as the last poem in Responsibilities, "A Coat" might stand either as an explanation of the new style of that volume or as a forecast of the more enterprising work to come; but, the epilogue, "While I, from that reed-throated whisperer," a biting poem of "forgiveness" for the injustices done Yeats by his public, certainly looks forward to the quarter of total subjectivity and his greatest poems. Again, the trend is to turn away

---

[28] Variorum, op. cit., p. 320.

[29] Ibid., p. 291.

from the world and toward the self and the companionship of the spirits; and, in fact, Yeats can forgive the public and himself his notoriety only because he is engaged in a higher pursuit:

> While I, from that reed-throated whisperer
> Who comes at need, although not now as once
> A clear articulation in the air,
> But inwardly, surmise companions
> Beyond the fling of the dull ass's hoof
> . . . . . .
> I can forgive even that wrong of wrongs,[30]

The spiritual phenomena which Yeats attempted to demonstrate physically in his youthful experiments are here reduced to an inward voice; yet occultism clearly has regained authority, both personally and poetically, over the mundane considerations of the mask, which now resumes its proper function as methodology. The resulting visionary perspective has already begun to emerge in "The Cold Heaven" and "The Magi" and will, in the third quarter of the Wheel, become the basis of Yeats' poetry.

---

[30]Ibid., pp. 320-1.

## CHAPTER IV

## COMPLETE SUBJECTIVITY

If the poems between 1903 and 1917 were characterized by the mask of activity and hatred, those which began with The Wild Swans At Coole in 1919 and followed into The Winding Stair and Other Poems in 1933 seem to reject, even to react against, this mask and attempt to find the poet's true role in the opposite values of detachment and, if not love, at least, wisdom and order. There were, of course, personal circumstances which contributed to this change of stance, and chief among them was Yeats' marriage. Ellmann writes of it:

> Had Yeats died instead of marrying in 1917, he would have been remembered as a remarkable minor poet who achieved a diction more powerful than that of his contemporaries but who, except in a handful of poems, did not have much to say with it. . . .Marriage to Georgie Hyde-Lees released his energies like a spring. He fell deeply in love with his wife and knew for the first time the happiness of a relatively uncomplicated relationship with another person.[1]

"Marriage," as MacNeice comments, "for almost any artist must be something of a descent to earth, a renunciation of the fantasy-life."[2] In Yeats' case, however, the fantasy

---

[1]Richard Ellmann, Yeats: The Man and the Masks, (New York: E. P. Dutton & Co., Inc., 1948), pp. 220-1.

[2]Louis MacNeice, The Poetry of W. B. Yeats, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1941), p. 108.

may only have been bartered for a new symbolic life; for it was Mrs. Yeats who introduced the poet to the symbolic system contained in A Vision which was to structure much of his poetry thereafter and it was with his wife's help that he began to restore Thoor Ballylee, the ancient tower which was to become quite deliberately the symbolic keystone of much of the poetry of this quarter:

> In mockery I have set
> A powerful emblem up,
> And sing it rhyme upon rhyme
> In mockery of a time
> Half dead at the top.[3]

The word "mockery" here is deceptive; it seems to be an attack and thus a continuation of the mask of hatred. But in the context of Yeats' life and poetry, it takes on the connotation of detachment, an abandonment of the violent half-dead time in which he was living and a movement toward the philosophical resolution which the emblem implies. It is, in fact, in Yeats' new, more comprehensive use of the symbol that the greatness of the poems of the third quarter lies, but, in order to appreciate these symbols in individual poems, it is first necessary to understand their origin both in Yeats' earlier life and poetry and in the new stimulus, A Vision.

As has been shown in the preceding chapter, the doctrine of the mask alone was for Yeats an inadequate basis for

---

[3]The Variorum Edition of the Poems of W. B. Yeats, ed. Peter Allt and Russell K. Alspach, (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1940), p. 480.--hereafter cited as Variorum.

poetry, primarily, one suspects, because it was essentially a pragmetic and mundane methodology, a mere means of navigation in the world of politics and personal quarrels and Yeats--always a magician at heart--longed for what might, for lack of a better word, be called transcendence. He did not wish to escape the chaotic material world, however, so much as he wished to order it and correlate it to the spiritual. As Unterecker writes,

> Only, Yeats believed, if he could discover the design of the world of spirit would the pattern of the world of matter in which he felt himself to be trapped make sense. The occult, imprecise yet furiously logical, offered systems of order which brought those two worlds close to each other, so close as a matter of fact that great adepts could penetrate the veil and discover from the spirits beyond clues to the essential nature of things.[4]

In its structure, "Adam's Curse" achieves something of a transcendence in that the final symbol of the moon brings about a resolution of acceptance which could never have emerged from the characters' discussion. But the bulk of the work of the second quarter, whether it seems to come from the man or the mask, is definitely of this world. Yeats, in his own words, wished to find the stable where the fiery Pegasus was held captive and "pull out the bolt," and the system of A Vision made this possible. "The power to classify," as Ellmann points out, "is the

---

[4]John Unterecker, A Reader's Guide to William Butler Yeats, (New York: The Noonday Press, 1959), p. 23.

power to control, and a new sense of strength comes into his writing."[5]

But if it is true that Mrs. Yeats' powerful magic lured her husband away from the violence of the world, it may also be argued that this same violence, coupled with his advancing age, drove him toward seclusion. The Easter uprising of 1916, as Yeats' poem upon it clearly indicates, changed everything; the patriots' vanity and stupidity, which disgusted Yeats before and became the target of his satiric poems, is transformed by their death into tragic nobility. Their gesture, however foolish, becomes, in Yeats' telling of it, a monument to their changeless devotion to an heroic dream:

> And what if excess of love
> Bewildered them till they died?
> I write it out in a verse--
> MacDonagh and MacBride
> And Connolly and Pearse
> Now and in time to be,
> Wherever green is worn,
> Are changed, changed utterly:
> A terrible beauty is born.[6]

Yeats seems to take the sixteen dead men for a personal lesson: that those blessed or cursed, as he was, with an "excess of love" are prone to inflexibility and consequent death; but after death, no matter how they have squandered

---

[5]Ellmann, op. cit., p. 236.

[6]Variorum, op. cit., p. 394.

their love in life's foolishness, they are "enchanted to a stone" and this very quality of inflexibility becomes the basis for their immortality as symbols of steadfast devotion to men still living in constant change. In other words, life is change, death is permanence; the sixteen were fools when alive because they would not accept life's condition of change, dead, they are supremely in their element and stand as symbols:

> Hearts with one purpose alone
> Through summer and winter seem
> Enchanted to a stone
> To trouble the living stream.
> The horse that comes from the road,
> The rider, the birds that range
> From cloud to tumbling cloud,
> Minute by minute they change;
> A shadow of cloud on the stream
> Changes minute by minute;
> A horse-hoof slides on the brim,
> And a horse plashes within it;
> The long-legged moor-hens dive,
> And hens to moor-cocks call;
> Minute by minute they live:
> The stone's in the midst of all.[7]

"Sixteen Dead Men," which directly follows "Easter 1916" in the Collected Poems, makes much the same point; the living and the dead are distinctly separate kinds of worlds and while living men argue, dead men transcend argument by virtue of their being symbols:

> You say that we should still the land
> Till Germany's overcome;

---

[7]Ibid., p. 393.

> But who is there to argue that
> Now Pearse is deaf and dumb?
> And is their logic to outweigh
> MacDonagh's bony thumb?[8]

Life's tedious arguments cannot stand against the power of symbolism which dead wield. A second example, "The Leaders of the Crowd," makes the same point:

> How can they know
> Truth flourishes where the student's lamp has shone,
> And there alone, that have no solitude?
> So the crowd come they care not what may come.
> They have loud music, hope every day renewed
> And heartier loves; that lamp is from the tomb.[9]

The idea of quieting Ireland "till Germany's overcome" is, of course, a reference to World War I. Irish nationalists had taken advantage of England's distraction with Germany to push independence; with the end of the war in 1919, the Black and Tans and the Auxiliaries were brought into Ireland to secure "law and order" and severe reprisals followed.[10] In June, 1922, civil war broke out in Ireland, lasting until May of the following year, and Yeats, who "had always closely identified" Ireland's troubles with his own, was "deeply affected."[11] Although Thoor Ballylee could hardly be termed Yeats' permanent residence, the poet had, by this time, come to think of

---

[8]Ibid., p. 395.

[9]Ibid., p. 398.

[10]Unterecker, op. cit., p. 182.

[11]Ellmann, op. cit., p. 240.

himself as living a symbolic death of isolation in his tower, working, as Milton did, by the student's lamp of truth with Sato's sword, the symbol of the unified culture which he could not find in Ireland, lying on the table beside pen and paper. In "Meditations in Time of Civil War," he expresses his conviction that chaos has come and that the culture is breaking down like the crumbling masonry of his castle; he explains why he has come to the symbolic life of the tower, what his life there is like and what he hopes to build there through art:

> We are closed in, and the key is turned
> On our uncertainty; somewhere
> A man is killed, or a house burned,
> Yet no clear fact to be discerned:
> Come build in the empty house of the stare.
>
> A barricade of stone or of wood;
> Some fourteen days of civil war;
> Last night they trundled down the road
> That dead young soldier in his blood:
> Come build in the empty house of the stare.
>
> We had fed the heart on fantasies,
> The heart's grown brutal from the fare;
> More substance in our enmities
> Than in our love; O honey-bees,
> Come build in the empty house of the stare.[12]

The lure of magic and the driving pressure of national violence combine in "The Second Coming," which will be read here as both doctrine on the historical implications

---

[12] Variorum, op. cit., p. 425.

of the Great Wheel and as a contemporary view of culture. Although the Great Wheel has been discussed to this point in terms of the individual, the same pattern is true of civilizations. As in Spengler's thought, with which Yeats often compares his own, each historical cycle shows the growth, maturation and decline characteristic of an individual organism.[13] Frye's explanation of the historical cycle is, perhaps, the most clear-cut: using the four cardinal points on the wheel, phases 1, 8, 15, and 22, which are, historically, 1000 years apart, Yeats designated phase 1 as 2000 B. C., phase 8 as 1000 B. C., phase 15 as the time of Christ, and phase 22 as 1000 A. D. Thus, phase 1 is, roughly, our own time as well as 2000 B. C. and phase 8 is 1000 years from now:

> Classical civilization extends from Phase 8 to 22, 1000 B. C. to A. D. 1000, and Christian civilization, which is our own, from A. D. 1000 to 3000, phases 22 to 8. We are half-way through the latter now, at the same point Classical civilization reached in the time of Christ. Phases 8 and 22 are represented by Troy and Byzantium, one an Asiatic city destroyed by Europeans and the other a European city captured by Asiatics, yet so close together that Byzantium, when it became a centre of Roman power, was thought of as a new Troy. Each civilization is the opposite or complement of its predecessor. Classical civilization was essentially antithetical, tragic, heroic and strongly individualised; Christian civilization is therefore essentially primary, democratic, altruistic and based on a subject-object attitude to reality. . . . Half-way through, a civilization generates the beginning of its counteracting movement, hence Christ, the presiding

---

[13]Northrop Frye, "The Rising of the Moon: A Study of 'A Vision'," An Honoured Guest, (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1966), p. 15.

> genius of the civilization that began a millennium later, appears in the middle of the Classical cycle. . . .It follows that a similar Messianic figure announcing Classical civilization must have appeared around 2000 B. C., and that another, announcing a second antithetical civilization of the future, is to appear somewhere around our own time.[14]

It is not difficult to apply these theories to "The Second Coming." Announcing the new Messianic figure, Yeats writes:

> Surely some revelation is at hand;
> Surely the Second Coming is at hand.
> . . . . . .
> The darkness drops again; but now I know
> That twenty centuries of stony sleep
> Were vexed to nightmare by a rocking cradle,
> And what rough beast, its hour come round at last,
> Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born?[15]

The image of the "rough beast" which is to initiate the new antithetical gyre at phase 1 or 2000 A. D. is, first of all, an image from Spiritus Mundi, which Unterecker refers to, somewhat slightingly, as Yeats' "warehouse of supersensual Platonic forms."[16] Unterecker goes on to term the beast "a nightmare symbol of the coming time,"[17] a statement not exactly in keeping with the doctrine of A Vision. The antithetical phase is, after all, that of the poet and art, a period of intense individuality, nor

---

[14]Ibid., pp. 19-20.

[15]Variorum, op. cit., p. 402.

[16]Unterecker, op. cit., p. 166.

[17]Ibid.

can a scheme so fatalistic as A Vision prefer one inevitability over another. Perhaps it is the trauma of change, the necessary "anarchy" which is frightening; but in itself, the predicted new classicism should be neither desirable nor abhorrent to mankind.

Unterecker takes the word, "nightmare," from Yeats himself, of course. But it is important to note that it is the "twenty centuries of stony sleep," the pre-Christian era that is "vexed to nightmare" by the birth of Christ. The nightmare seems to be change itself, rather than the character of the new era. Thus, while the shape with the lion body and the head of a man, a product of the East which Yeats declares is always, in his symbolism, representative of human power, is clearly the new antithetical era,[18] it is not, in itself, horrible. Unterecker, caught in this primary gyre, may simply lack the poet's perspective, for as Yeats, an antithetical man, says,

> My instructors certainly expect neither a "primitive state" nor a return to barbarism as primitivism and barbarism are ordinarily understood; antithetical revelation is an intellectual influx neither from beyond mankind nor born of a virgin, but begotten from our spirit and history.[19]

In fact, as its concluding question testifies, the poem does little predicting at all and, even in the context of

---

[18]W. B. Yeats, A Vision, (New York: Collier Books, 1937), p. 257.

[19]Ibid., p. 262.

A Vision, Yeats, quoting his own poem, can say little more than that the new era will be antithetical:

> . . .what else it must be no man can say, for always at the critical moment the Thirteenth Cone, the sphere, the unique intervenes.
>
> Somewhere in sands of the desert
> A shape with lion body and the head of a man,
> A gaze blank and pitiless as the sun,
> Is moving its slow thighs, while all about it
> Reel shadows of the indignant desert birds.[20]

It is possible, then, to say that these indignant birds represent the Thirteenth Cone; it is also possible to say that the widening gyre is the primary cone approaching full expansion, and that the beast is the Antichrist beast of the Apocalypse. Obviously, this poem, like "Leda and the Swan," which speaks of the initiation of the classical era, owes much to A Vision, but an intensive search for references of this sort limits these poems more than it expands them. "The Second Coming" works much in the same manner as A Vision by virtue of the fact that the images seem to be what they represent; no special knowledge is required in order for the reader to sense a visionary perspective or to feel the trauma of change. Likewise, no knowledge of modern Irish history, which is hinted at in the poem, is necessary for understanding the poet's despair of contemporary culture:

---

[20]Ibid., p. 263.

> Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,
> The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere
> The ceremony of innocence is drowned;
> The best lack all conviction, while the worst
> Are full of passionate intensity.[21]

It is this same culture of hatred and violence seen in "The Second Coming" that Yeats wishes his daughter to escape in "A Prayer For My Daughter," and again it is symbolized by a furious sea-storm:

> Once more the storm is howling, and half hid
> Under this cradle-hood and coverlid
> My child sleeps on. There is no obstacle
> But Gregory's wood and one bare hill
> Whereby the haystack-and roof-levelling wind,
> Bred on the Atlantic, can be stayed;
> And for an hour I have walked and prayed [22]
> Because of the great gloom that is in my mind.

Donald Davie argues that almost all of Michael Robartes and the Dancer is "devoted to exhorting women above all to hate and avoid abstraction,"[23] that is, to avoid the rock-like inflexibility which, in Yeats' opinion, destroyed Maud Gonne and others who worked for Irish independence. It would seem to be an oversimplification to suggest that any volume of poetry could be so single-minded but there is certainly in the poems of this quarter a new attraction to what might be termed the feminine virtues of custom and ceremony. These too are, of course,

---

[21] Variorum, op. cit., p. 402.

[22] Ibid., p. 403.

[23] Donald Davie, "Michael Robartes and the Dancer," An Honoured Guest, (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1966), p. 75.

abstractions, but they are abstractions that foster rather than destroy life. At any rate, there seems to be at least a partial abandonment of the revolutionary spirit of Yeats' former public life. In "A Prayer For My Daughter," for example, Yeats, brooding upon the approaching destruction predicted in "The Second Coming," recalls Maud Gonne, in his view ruined by her own intellectual hatred, yet sees that innocence may be recovered and hatred defeated within the protective aristocratic setting where custom and ceremony, which Unterecker expands to the larger idea of "the frail, beautiful manipulation of form,"[24] flourish. Yeats writes:

> Considering that, all hatred driven hence,
> The soul recovers radical innocence
> And learns at last that it is self-delighting,
> Self-appeasing, self-affrighting,
> And that its own sweet will is Heaven's will;
> She can, though every face should scowl
> And every windy quarter howl
> Or every bellows burst, be happy still.
>
> And may her bridegroom bring her to a house
> Where all's accustomed, ceremonious;
> For arrogance and hatred are the wares
> Peddled in the thoroughfares.
> How but in custom and in ceremony
> Are innocence and beauty born?
> Ceremony's a name for the rich horn,
> And custom for the spreading laurel tree.[25]

The concluding lines of "A Prayer For My Daughter" suggest that symbolism by this time was for Yeats not only

---

[24]Unterecker, op. cit., p. 167.

[25]Variorum, op. cit., pp. 405-6.

a technique, but a personal methodology for individual and national order. It is important to note, however, that the symbolism being discussed here is not that of the French Symbolist movement with which Yeats for a time was associated. No true French Symbolist could well endure the conventionality of the horn of plenty or the laurel tree for, far from being suggestive of inexpressible feelings, they imply--and, indeed, the final two lines of "A Prayer For My Daughter" intend them to imply--almost the one-to-one relationship of the sign. In order to understand Yeats' particular use of symbolism, it is necessary to investigate its origins in his youthful occultism. In his early days, he had dreamed of establishing the "Castle of Heroes" an island site in the middle of Lough Key where the finest men and women of Ireland would unite to explore and utilize the occult.[26] Ellmann writes that as a part of their exercises, the members of this budding society practiced a system which Mathers had taught to Yeats of concentrating upon an ancient symbol and allowing the will to engage in free association:

> They would impel their imaginations to dwell on the ancient divinities, who would often obligingly seem to take definite shape and to enlighten them on various aspects of the other world. Yeats called this method of meditation "vision," but perhaps

---

[26]Ellmann, op. cit., pp. 121-2.

> deliberate revery would be a more accurate and acceptable designation. . . .Towards the end of 1897 Yeats tried to hasten matters by organizing a group of enthusiastic Celts in London for the purpose of visionary exploration. Under his leadership the members would concentrate on a symbol and then tell each other what they saw, which was usually related to what they wanted to see; by power of suggestion all the members of the group would gradually build up a sort of collective vision.[27]

Yeats' task, as he saw it at this time, was to formalize a sacred rite for the order and as Demon Est Deus Inversus (a demon is an inverted god), his adopted name in the order, he worked toward this end, largely by intense meditation upon ancient symbols.[28] In this connection, Yeats belongs more with the modern Classicists such as Eliot than with the French Symbolists. At any rate, A Vision was, at last, Yeats' sacred book and Ellmann, who sees its effects, or perhaps its promise, in Yeats' plays long before the poems actually reflect it, comments extensively on the confidence that its hard-won certainty gave the poet:

> Yeats could reasonably consider his symbolic method, in which the symbol emerged from the conflict of opposites and transcended it, as a literary extension of his theories of spiritual development. He was beginning to feel, too, that the change of thought and style which he had tried to bring about in his work since 1903 had been realized in every direction. He had reason for his growing confidence.[29]

---

[27]Ibid., pp. 123-4.

[28]Ibid., p. 96.

[29]Ibid., p. 210.

Perhaps the best example of Yeats' symbolic technique and methodology at this time is "Among School Children," written from an actual observation of a progressive convent school in 1926.[30] The poem is notoriously intricate, moving, like Yeats' early "visions" by free association from point to point, but the concluding symbols of the dancer and the tree do, as Ellmann's remarks suggest, transcend the considerations of time and change. It is important to note, however, that, whereas earlier poems were composed largely of opposites, here the structure is three-fold (for example, the three systematizers of stanza six, Plato, Aristotle and Pythagoras) or four-fold (the root, leaf, blossom and bole of the tree). If before, in the doctrine of the mask, Yeats thought in terms of opposites, the idea of multiplicity here suggests a more encompassing unity. Like Steppenwolf, Yeats, thinking he is two people, discovers that he is three or three hundred and that only by viewing the total organism in all of its aspects can he hope to express truth.

Although there are still poems in this quarter which reflect Yeats' earlier dualistic thinking such as "A Dialogue of Self and Soul" and "Ego Dominus Tuus," other poems attempt to encompass more by including greater numbers of

---

[30]Unterecker, op. cit., p. 191.

symbolic portions. "In Memory Of Major Robert Gregory" is a good example of Yeats' new symbolic multiple-personality, as is "All Souls' Night." In both poems, Yeats, as the collector of symbolic fragments, attempts to construct a total society in keeping with his previously mentioned aim of creating a society united by symbols or created of symbolic figures. In both cases, the setting is a stable, aristocratic home, demonstrating the poet's need for order against the world's violence. As he writes in "All Souls' Night":

> I need some mind that, if the cannon sound
> From every quarter of the world, can stay
> Wound in mind's pondering
> As mummies in the mummy-cloth are wound;
> Because I have a marvellous thing to say,
> None but the living mock.[31]

This sort of introversion is, of course, exactly what the Great Wheel predicted for the personality at the 15th phase:

> All thought becomes an image and the soul
> Becomes a body: that body and that soul
> Too perfect at the full to lie in a cradle,
> Too lonely for the traffic of the world:
> Body and soul cast out and cast away
> Beyond the visible world.[32]

The search for and the celebration of unity, in the sense of a mystical perception of the whole, is the predominant theme of the poems of the third quarter. This

---

[31] Variorum, op. cit., p. 471.

[32] W. B. Yeats, A Vision, (New York: Collier Books, 1937), p. 61.

unity, as has been stated before, was the product of two simultaneous rhythms or patterns, that of the antinomies which was seen in the earlier poetry and the cyclical pattern of identity which the newly-found vision supplied in the form of the Great Wheel. These two patterns are best illustrated in a comparative study of the two Byzantium poems; but in order to understand these poems, it is first necessary to understand that the Byzantine culture represented for Yeats precisely the unity which he sought. Of this culture, he wrote,

> I think that in early Byzantium, maybe never before or since in recorded history, religious, aesthetic and practical life were one, that architect and artificers--though not, it may be poets, for language had been the instrument of controversy and must have grown abstract--spoke to the multitude and the few alike. The painter, the mosaic worker, the worker in gold and silver, the illuminator of sacred books, were almost impersonal, almost perhaps without the consciousness of individual design, absorbed in their subject-matter and that the vision of a whole people. They could copy out of old Gospel books those pictures that seemed as sacred as the text, and yet weave all into a vast design, the work of many that seemed the work of one, that made building, picture, pattern, metal-work of rail and lamp, seem but a single image;[33]

It should be noted that a great deal of Byzantium's attraction for Yeats was the fact that it offered, not only personal unity for the artist, but national unity. Thus, in "Sailing To Byzantium," it is a natural contrasting

---

[33]W. B. Yeats, A Vision, (New York: Collier Books, 1937), pp. 279-80.

image to Ireland, the violent and foolish country from which Yeats had secluded himself. Ireland and Byzantium are antinomies; Ireland represents mortality, sensuality and chaos, Byzantium, eternity, intellectualism and order. The speaker, seeing the character of the natural world and realizing that his advancing age renders him unfit to inhabit this world of the body must decide to abandon it for the symbolic life of Byzantium:

> An aged man is but a paltry thing,
> A tattered coat upon a stick, unless
> Soul clap its hands and sing, and louder sing
> For every tatter in its mortal dress,
> Nor is there singing school but studying
> Monuments of its own magnificence;
> And therefore I have sailed the seas and come
> To the holy city of Byzantium.[34]

In other words, "Sailing To Byzantium" is a highly sophisticated body-soul debate, but there is no true resolution; there is not even, as in "A Dialogue of Self and Soul," a sense of free choice. The speaker is "sick with desire," he is chased from the natural world by age. Thus, his desire to be "gathered into the artifice of eternity" is a desire to escape and, as will be shown, his anticipation of eternal permanence is illusionary in terms of the design of the Great Wheel:

> Once out of nature I shall never take
> My bodily form from any natural thing,
> But such a form as Grecian goldsmiths make

---

[34] Variorum, op. cit., pp. 407-8.

Of hammered gold and gold enamelling
To keep a drowsy Emperor awake;
Or set upon a golden bough to sing
To lords and ladies of Byzantium
Of what is past, or passing, or to come.[35]

The dialectical rhythm of antinomies is intensely realized in "Sailing To Byzantium," but there is no acceptance of it; instead, the speaker seems to wish to assume a permanent form and thus, escape this rhythm. A Vision, with its historical and individual pattern of cycles furnished a larger context in which these antinomies became intelligible and acceptable; if a young man grows old, he is still destined to become young again as he whirls in the gyre yet, by the principle of identity, his essence or animating principle is not changed or destroyed; he is, for eternity, the same unique soul. Thus, in "Byzantium," where this cyclical pattern is more fully understood, the speaker displays more emotional control over the realization of the human-superhuman conflict and, as a result, the poem seems less frantic and more visionary. This unified, visionary perspective is due, in part, to the fact that "Byzantium" confines itself to a single setting, that of the perfectly unified culture of the holy city. Of course, the comparison to the natural world is implied, but the action is contained within Byzantium whereas, in the earlier poem, the poet attempts to imagine this

---

[35]Ibid., p. 408.

ideal from the poem's actual human situation. As Unterecker states this distinction:

> "Sailing To Byzantium" represents the voyage and is written from the point of view of the uninitiated outsider who leaves the material world for the immaterial. "Byzantium," on the other hand, is written from the point of view of the initiate who watches the uninitiated, unpurged spirits arriving from beyond the "gong-tormented sea" which separates Byzantium's reality from the flesh and blood reality of the twentieth-century world.[36]

Then too, "Byzantium" contains the element of inevitability; in the earlier poem, the speaker pleads for transformation, but in "Byzantium" things seem to happen according to a great plan:

> Where blood-begotten spirits come
> And all complexities of fury leave,[37]

Thus, although both poems deal with the same theme of conflict between the human and the superhuman and both reach much the same resolution, that "The smithies break the flood," that is, that through eternal art, man can transcend the temporal life or "break bitter furies of complexity,"[38] Yeats' understanding in "Byzantium" of a larger pattern marks that poem as the more mature work in terms of his system. Unterecker argues that "Byzantium" surpasses "Sailing To Byzantium" because it offers the

---

[36]Unterecker, op. cit., p. 217.

[37]Variorum, op. cit., p. 498.

[38]Ibid.

final purification by which the cycle of death and rebirth can be broken and the spirit escape the eternal process of begetting image after image.[39] But this argument seems much more applicable to the earlier poem than to "Byzantium" and Yeats himself seems to consider such escape unlikely:

> Neither the Phantasmagoria, nor the Purification, nor any other state between death and birth should be considered as a reward or paradise. Neither between death and birth nor between birth and death can the soul find more than momentary happiness; its object is to pass rapidly round its circle and find freedom from that circle.[40]

The question is, of course, what Yeats meant by freedom from the circle; Unterecker would argue that freedom implies escape from rebirth, but there is a freedom in acceptance of the cycle also, a freedom which Yeats' final poems display, an escape into the cycle. The evidence for either argument lies in the final stanza of "Byzantium:"

> Astraddle on the dolphin's mire and blood,
> Spirit after spirit! The smithies break the flood,
> The golden smithies of the Emperor!
> Marbles of the dancing floor
> Break bitter furies of complexity,
> Those images that yet
> Fresh images beget,
> That dolphin-torn, that gong-tormented sea.[41]

"Sailing To Byzantium" ended with the image of the golden

---

[39] Unterecker, op. cit., p. 219.

[40] W. B. Yeats, A Vision, (New York: Collier Books, 1937), p. 236.

[41] Variorum, op. cit., p. 498.

bird, an eternal, changeless work of art, removed from nature. But, in "Byzantium," the final stanza looks back upon the natural world. The spirits ride upon the "mire and blood" of the dolphin, spirit rides upon body, image upon natural object. It is interesting here to note, incidentally, that Yeats was somewhat disturbed when Sturge Moore pointed out in a 1930 review of "Sailing To Byzantium" that the golden bird was still a bird, a natural object.[42] Yeats, who insisted then that bird as art was supernatural, is more careful in "Byzantium" to refine his images out of natural existence:

> Miracle, bird or golden handiwork,
> More miracle than bird or handiwork,[43]

The image of the marble floor in the final stanza is an intricate one. Unmistakably an artifact rather than a natural object, it is first, like A Vision and like the Collected Poems, a large design made up of the fitting together of smaller pieces. Second, Yeats makes of it a dancing floor which recalls the famous line from "Among School Children," "How can we know the dancer from the dance?"[44] The image of the dance superimposed upon the pure artifact of the mosaic adds a new dimension to the natural-

---

[42] Unterecker, op. cit., p. 218.

[43] Variorum, op. cit., p. 497.

[44] Ibid., p. 446.

supernatural debate; the smithies achieve the best of both worlds, eternal ordered movement, an image which requires both the abstract pattern of the mosaic and the living dancer. Art, which implies pattern and abstraction, is a "floor" for human activity; life is directed by art.

If art and life are one in the image of the dancing floor, it becomes additionally significant that the poem's concluding line seems to convey a consideration of, almost a longing for, the torn, tormented sea. Since the speaker of the poem is in Byzantium, his mention of the sea could only imply a desire to recross it and return to the natural world. Images beget fresh images; the problem Yeats found in selecting a purely abstract image emerges here as a theme: art takes its material from life, its images refer back to life, and pure art is impossible because existence is a death and rebirth cycle. This return to life, which marks "Byzantium" as, thematically, more mature than "Sailing To Byzantium," becomes apparent in Yeats' final poems.

## CHAPTER V

## THE BREAKING OF STRENGTH

As the Great Wheel predicts, Yeats' final poems display a conscious, almost an enforced, return to the world and objectivity. Unterecker notes that the rooting of art in Irish folk legends had long been a matter of doctrine for Yeats; and now, with the burden of old age and the threat of death upon him, the poet returns to them, principally, one suspects, in order to complete the great design of his work. Unterecker writes,

> Though Yeats from the beginning of his career displayed a fondness for refrain, it is only in the late poems that it becomes a characteristic device. Yeats' project in much of this poetry is to root his form in whatever is most traditional, most of the people, and at the same time to preach the necessity of an intellectual aristocracy. . . .his conviction that art is based in the uneducated masses helped return him to a careful re-examination of folk poetry.[1]

This folk impulse, to which the abundance of "songs" in the last poems gives evidence, is easily detected and needs little explication. The Crazy Jane poems are the best example of them; Jane, a highly dramatic character, is a lusty woman of the soil who, like the Shakespearean fool,

---

[1]John Unterecker, A Reader's Guide To William Butler Yeats, (New York: The Noonday Press, 1959), p. 262.

speaks truth in a common tongue. She is highly physical, anti-intellectual and viciously anticlerical.[2]

"Crazy Jane Talks With The Bishop," for example, is basically a body-soul debate; Jane represents the body, of course, but the body grown wise through experience and, as such, she defeats the argument of the Bishop whose wisdom is abstract. In other words, wisdom grows out of experience, spirit grows out of body and the natural world is as necessary to unity as the ideal:

> "A woman can be proud and stiff
> When on love intent;
> But Love has pitched his mansion in
> The place of excrement;
> For nothing can be sole or whole
> That has not been rent."[3]

It may be a matter of taste to say that the Crazy Jane poems and others in the same style are artistically unsatisfactory or that the folk impulse, in general, is more a matter for the anthropologist to study than for the artist to imitate. Even Louis MacNeice, who, like many modern poets, admires Yeats' later work, admits that they are not the poet's best work, but argues that they have a reputable place in his total work:

---

[2]Richard Ellmann, Yeats: The Man and the Masks, (New York: E. P. Dutton & Co., 1948), p. 267.

[3]The Variorum Edition of the Poems of W. B. Yeats, ed. Peter Allt and Russell K. Alspach, (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1940), p. 513.--hereafter cited as Variorum.

> If Yeats had written nothing but his refrain poems he would not be the great poet he is; this would prove to the typical book-reviewer that he is less great for having written them. Crazy Jane's songs are admittedly slight when seen against "The Second Coming" or "Byzantium." They are not however, so slight as they appear superficially--certainly not if we relate them to Yeats' work as a whole. . . .He still liked to think of poetry as coming from the people (a rural people, it is assumed) or at least being in form and content sympathetic to them.[4]

In terms of his total work, Yeats' return to the Blake-like lyric, which he had abandoned in his middle period,[5] to themes of sexuality and humor are in keeping with the objective-to-subjective-to-objective pattern of the Great Wheel. MacNeice states this return to the world in terms of the physical as opposed to the intellectual:

> The pure intellect is distrusted as a liar because it relies upon diagrams; the simple-minded fool and the natural physical man remain in touch with the truth because their world remains concrete.[6]

Yeats himself makes much the same comment in "The Municipal Gallery Revisited";

> John Synge, I and Augusta Gregory, thought
> All that we did, all that we said or sang
> Must come from contact with the soil, from that
> Contact everything Antaeus-like grew strong.
> We three alone in modern times had brought
> Everything down to that sole test again,
> Dream of the noble and the beggar-man.[7]

---

[4]Louis MacNeice, The Poetry of W. B. Yeats, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1941), pp. 146-7.

[5]Ibid., p. 141.

[6]Ibid., p. 143.

[7]Variorum, op. cit., p. 603.

Synge, representative of the wealth of native Irish imagery and myth, Lady Gregory, the patron of the arts, and Yeats, the synthesizer of the two symbolic figures, together form the triangular ideal society previously discussed. After his brief transcendent period, Yeats seems, in the last poems, to have been reminded of his aesthetic theories and the folk poetry is, in part, intended to re-establish this theory.

It is important to note that Yeats' ideal society was conceived of, not only as a haven for the individual artist, but as a sincere proposal for perfecting the culture. Yeats defined the role of the poet in nationalistic terms. Thus, the folk poems, which attempt to give permanent form to the Irish character, may be seen as a kind of service to his country. This stance of public servant is obvious in Yeats' discussion of the Irish dramatic movement in his speech of acceptance of the Nobel Prize;[8] and it is a posture which the Great Wheel predicted for the man of the final quarter:

> And after that the crumbling of the moon:
> The soul remembering its loneliness
> Shudders in many cradles; all is changed.
> It would be the world's servant, and as it serves,
> Choosing whatever task's most difficult

---

[8] W. B. Yeats, The Autobiography of William Butler Yeats, (New York: Collier Books, 1965), pp. 378-87.

> Among tasks not impossible, it takes
> Upon the body and upon the soul
> The coarseness of the drudge.[9]

If the folk poems represent a public service, the wild, wicked old man poems reveal the sometimes bitter, sometimes witty personal side of Yeats. "The Spur" is typical of these poems:

> You think it horrible that lust and rage
> Should dance attention upon my old age;
> They were not such a plague when I was young;
> What else have I to spur me into song?[10]

The poem is bitter, but it also has the humour typical of Yeats' later poetry, a humour which MacNeice describes as "a blend of whimsicality, bravado, canniness, and sadism."[11] The words, dance and song, to the experienced reader of Yeats, suggest several loose ends which the pose of the gleeful old sinner was intended to tie up: the folk song, the image of the dancer from the third quarter, symbolic of unity but here distorted by the limitations of age, and the mad abandon of an old man who has learned too much in his life. "Why Should Not Old Men Be Mad?," which recounts the human tragedies Yeats has witnessed is, in fact, a sort of justification of the pose:

---

[9]W. B. Yeats, A Vision, (New York: Collier Books, 1937), p. 62.

[10]Variorum, op. cit., p. 591.

[11]MacNeice, op. cit., p. 150.

No single story would they find
Of an unbroken happy mind,
A finish worthy of the start.
Young men know nothing of this sort,
Observant old men know it well;
And when they know what old books tell,
And that no better can be had,
Know why an old man should be mad.[12]

But, if old age brought bitter memories of his life, the symbols Yeats had made of people and events softened their memory by transforming them into art. "The Municipal Gallery Revisited" and "Beautiful Lofty Things," poems which look backward to the isolated world of images of the third quarter, are more nostalgic than bitter:

Maud Gonne at Howth station waiting a train,
Pallas Athene in that straight back and arrogant head:
All the Olympians; a thing never known again.[13]

Then too, in some of the last poems, the bitterness of old age provides a poetic stimulus of its own, as in "An Acre of Grass:"

My temptation is quiet.
Here at life's end
Neither loose imagination,
Nor the mill of the mind
Consuming its rag and bone,
Can make the truth known.

Grant me an old man's frenzy,
Myself must I remake
Till I am Timon and Lear
Or that William Blake
Who beat upon the wall
Till Truth obeyed his call;

---

[12] Variorum, op. cit., p. 626.

[13] Ibid., p. 578.

> A mind Michael Angelo knew
> That can pierce the clouds,
> Or inspired by frenzy
> Shake the dead in their shrouds;
> Forgotten else by mankind,
> An old man's eagle mind.[14]

The idea of remaking the self is not new in Yeats; his life and work is, in fact, a history of reassessment and revision. The poem is important because it advances Yeats' final stance of objectivity heightened to indifference, a stance based upon the paradox of joy in tragedy. As MacNeice explains,

> . . .Timon and Lear are chosen because in both of them passion was stronger than reason and in both of them disillusionment, anger, and hatred, which would seem to lead to nihilism, lead actually to a most articulate assertion of human vitality and individuality; Yeats's paradox still holds good, that tragedy implies the joy of life.[15]

It is impossible and, indeed, according to the death and rebirth pattern of the wheel, should be impossible to determine a single poem which would stand as a final statement of Yeats' thinking; but "Lapis Lazuli," perhaps even more than Yeats' own choice, "Under Ben Bulben," seems to display more of "the true Yeats" than any of his other poems. This is because the joy of life in tragedy

---

[14]Ibid., pp. 575-6.

[15]MacNeice, op. cit., p. 155.

of which MacNeice speaks is an artistic indifference which includes passion, not an intellectual one. "Under Ben Bulben" is, stylistically and thematically, intellectual; it is abstract, as Yeats himself often wished to be and never totally was. It is epigrammatic, it is public, it gives advice to young poets, it is purposely ambiguous, providing, finally, the famous epitaph:

> Cast a cold eye
> On life, on death.
> Horseman, pass by![16]

In short, the poem is posed, a public final statement of supreme indifference which, while it serves to round out the pattern of the Great Wheel, fails to capture the essence of Yeats as a living and, therefore, confused and struggling human being.

"Lapis Lazuli" presents much the same theme of indifference in a much more human tone. Most obviously, the glittering human eyes in contrast to the spiritual and abstract horseman are a more accessible image. It has, generally, a tone of sympathy for the human condition; although the Chinamen are above human tragedy, their concern for appropriate gestures shows their respect for it:

> There, on the mountain and the sky,
> On all the tragic scene they stare.

---

[16] Variorum, op. cit., p. 640.

> One asks for mournful melodies;
> Accomplished fingers begin to play.[17]

Then too, "Lapis Lazuli" begins in today's concrete, hysterical world and moves toward transcendence, whereas "Under Ben Bulben" is entirely other-worldly, offering little in the way of bridging for the reader. "Lapis Lazuli" is a statement on art demonstrated by examples from art; "Under Ben Bulben" appeals to supernatural authority. In both poems the statement is nearly the same, that art is a means of transcendence, and therefore, a means of acceptance of the mortal world:

> That's Ophelia, that Cordelia;
> Yet they should the last scene be there,
> The great stage curtain about to drop,
> If worthy their prominent part in the play,
> Do not break up their lines to weep.
> They know that Hamlet and Lear are gay;
> Gaiety transfiguring all that dread.[18]

But, in "Lapis Lazuli," both the passionate and the intellectual side of the transcendence are presented and, thus, the poem accomplishes what the one-sided "Under Ben Bulben" does not, the actual movement from despair to joy.

Yeats was, it seems, incapable of total objectivity; that is, perhaps, why he pursued it so strenuously and why, in A Vision, he devised a rationale against it as a

---

[17]Ibid., p. 567.

[18]Ibid., p. 565.

permanent stance. Thus, while both "Lapis Lazuli" and "Under Ben Bulben" are masterful poems exalting indifference, "The Circus Animal's Desertion," which proclaims the pattern of the Great Wheel more than any other single Yeats poem, is the most fitting final statement in his work.

Like many of his greatest poems, "The Circus Animals' Desertion" begins with the immediate situation which, in this case, seems to be the loss of poetic inspiration. Yeats, an old man, then reviews previous themes and phases in his work and, conveniently enough for the purpose here, his following four stanzas may be easily seen to represent the four phases of the Great Wheel. In stanza two, he speaks of Oisin, representative of the dreams of the unformed youth; stanza three recounts the fanaticism and hatred, centered around Maud Gonne, which characterized Yeats in the phase termed The Discovery of Strength. Stanza four represents Yeats' period of pure symbolism:

> Heart-mysteries there, and yet when all is said
> It was the dream itself enchanted me:
> Character isolated by a deed
> To engross the present and dominate memory.
> Players and painted stage took all my love,
> And not those things that they were emblems of.[19]

The concluding stanza, then, should represent, like "Lapis Lazuli" and "Under Ben Bulben," a posture of returned

---

[19]Ibid., p. 630.

objectivity, heightened to indifference; but instead one finds, as in "Byzantium," an insistence upon rebirth into the mortal and chaotic natural world:

> Those masterful images because complete
> Grew in pure mind, but out of what began?
> A mound of refuse or the sweepings of a street,
> Old kettles, old bottles, and a broken can,
> Old iron, old bones, old rags, that raving slut
> Who keeps the till. Now that my ladder's gone,
> I must lie down where all the ladders start,
> In the foul rag-and-bone shop of the heart.[20]

There is an objectivity here in the view the poet takes of his own life and work but there is also an impulse to begin again in the natural world. Both impulses are consistent with the Great Wheel, for it is, in essence, a death and rebirth cycle. The line, "I must lie down where all the ladders start," is, obviously, an announcement of death, but it is also a prediction of rebirth. The poet will begin again, but not as the author of "The Wanderings of Oisin," for the experience of the Great Wheel teaches the soul and the gyre of which it is a cross section expands with each revolution. Again, the dual pattern of identity and dialectical rhythm is apparent; life is a situation of constant change, yet there is possible, for the artist, a philosophical perspective in regard to this change which unifies it into a larger, joyful pattern:

> All things fall and are built again,
> And those that build them again are gay.[21]

---

[20] Ibid.

[21] Ibid., p. 566.

# BIBLIOGRAPHY

## A. PRIMARY SOURCES


Yeats, W. B. *The Autobiography of William Butler Yeats*. New York: Collier Books, 1965.

Yeats, W. B. *The Variorum Edition of the Poems of W. B. Yeats*. eds. Peter Allt and Russell K. Alspach. New York: The Macmillan Company, 1940.

Yeats, W. B. *A Vision*. New York: Collier Books, 1937.


## B. SECONDARY SOURCES


Ellmann, Richard, *Yeats: The Man and the Masks*. New York: E. P. Dutton & Co., Inc., 1948.

*An Honoured Guest: New Essays on W. B. Yeats*. eds. Denis Donoghue and J. R. Mulryne. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1966.

MacNeice, Louis. *The Poetry of W. B. Yeats*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1941.

Seiden, Morton Irving. *William Butler Yeats: The Poet as a Mythmaker, 1865-1939*. Michigan State University Press, 1962.

Unterecker, John. *A Reader's Guide to William Butler Yeats*. New York: The Noonday Press, 1959.

Ure, Peter. *Towards A Mythology: Studies in the Poetry of W. B. Yeats*. New York: Russell & Russell, 1967.